Promoting informal learning by integrating smartphones into the language classroom

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Abstract. Although smartphones have become normalised in people's everyday behaviours, they remain under-exploited from a language learning perspective. This paper describes a study in an Irish university which explored the nature and extent of language learners' existing use of smartphones for informal learning purposes through a survey, a case study, and a group interview. The results showed that firstly, smartphones played only a limited and tangential role in their language learning, and secondly, that learners had narrow perceptions of what 'actual, proper study' entails, demonstrated by their overwhelming preference for more traditional language learning resources and practices. The paper finishes by making suggestions regarding how smartphones can be integrated into the language classroom, at both third and second level, to help broaden learner perceptions of what language study is, and consequently, allow smartphones to play a more significant role in their learning practices.

Keywords: MALL, smartphones, informal learning, learner autonomy.

1.   Introduction

Smartphones have been well-researched in terms of formal, teacher-led projects (Marek & Wu, 2016), yet what learners actually choose to do on their devices outside of these projects remains relatively under-explored (Lai & Zheng, 2018). Thus, while the ideal (or idealised) smartphone user is one who embraces the flexibility and convenience of mobile devices and takes an agentive role in developing and utilising a range of sources to create a beneficial personalised learning environment (Godwin-Jones, 2020), the extent to which language learners harness smartphones for "informal learning [which] is learner-controlled, not linked to any course

or institution, and takes place outside the classroom" is not well documented (Trinder, 2017, p. 402). This study aimed to fill that research gap by exploring how students of modern languages at an Irish university both perceived and used their smartphones as language learning tools. This paper will briefly describe the methodology and results of the study, and conclude by making recommendations on how explicit in-classroom focus on smartphones can help learners become more informed, judicious users of smartphones outside the classroom.

2.   Method

The methodology comprised three stages. Firstly, a survey was distributed to students of modern languages which garnered 84 responses. Secondly, a case study was conducted with 20 students of modern languages in which, over a two-week period, they were asked to complete seven reports on how they had encountered second languages on their smartphones in the previous 24 hours (the participants completed 133 of a possible 140 reports). The third stage was a group interview of the case study participants, which seven attended. This interview produced a transcript of 10,897 words, which was subjected to thematic analysis following the six-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006)[2]. Themes identified during this stage were triangulated with data from both the survey and case study to ensure that any findings made were robustly supported across the data sets. Links to the survey, case study form, and interview schedule are provided in the supplementary materials.

3.   Results

This section will offer key excerpts of the data collected. Figure 1 offers insight into the frequency with which language learners encountered second languages on their smartphone.

Case study data showed similar patterns regarding how often these students of modern languages actually encountered second-language content on their smartphones. As Table 1 indicates, across the 20 case study participants, who returned 133 of a possible 140 reports between them, instances of second-language encounters remained low when excluding university-related work and dictionary use.

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2. Notably (1) familiarising yourself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.
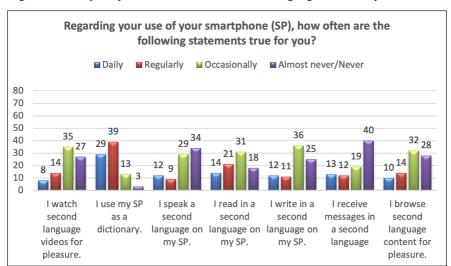
Figure 1.   Frequency of encounters with second languages on smartphones

Table 1.   Smartphone-mediated exposure to second-language content in case study

In what ways did you encounter your second language while using your smartphone in the past 24 hours? (Please tick all that apply)	
doing university homework/coursework	65/133
doing other language study (unrelated to homework/coursework)	23/133
using a dictionary	49/133
using language learning apps (apart from dictionary)	13/133
spoken communication with friends	17/133
written communication with friends	23/133
reading social media content/posts	46/133
commenting on social media content/posts	12/133
listening to second-language music	27/133
watching second-language videos	19/133

4.   Discussion

Overall, data from all three strands revealed that while the participants were heavy smartphone users, and while the majority of their exposure to second-language content occurred on smartphones (such as the 46 instances of social media content in Table 1), this rarely translated into production of second-language content on their smartphones (only 12 instances of second-language comments on social

media among 20 participants over a two-week period). Instead, learners were more likely to perceive smartphones and social media as separate from their studies, with 90.5% (n=76/84) agreeing that 'I use my smartphone to escape study' and 89.3% (n=75/84) expressing the same sentiment about social media. Across all data strands, the following themes emerged regarding the role of smartphones and social media in their learning practices.

- Learners held traditional, narrow perceptions of what 'actual, proper' language study entails, exemplified by one interview comment that "for actual like proper study, and schoolwork, I wouldn't use my phone at all really". This form of study involves traditional practices such as learning off lists of verbs, or writing target language items multiple times. This perception extended into having the right 'mentality' for study, with learners needing to be in study mode for encounters with second-language content to be beneficial.

- Learners also had clear perceptions of what smartphones are for – communication, entertainment, and socialisation purposes. Beyond use as a dictionary, use of language learning apps was infrequent, with only a minority of students using smartphones for anything beyond their prescribed course/homework, instead displaying an overwhelming preference for laptops. As one participant commented, "you use your laptop for serious work, and not just for playing around", a sentiment which highlighted how smartphones were perceived. As survey data showed, smartphones and social media were viewed as ways to escape study, rather than study resources.

- While smartphones only played a limited role in the 'actual, proper study' described above, learners did value them for what this researcher terms 'study-lite' activities – a hybrid of study and entertainment similar to edutainment, but making more use of non-educational resources such as Netflix, YouTube, and various social media. Consumption of second-language music or video content fit this categorisation, being described by one participant as "a positive break from study".

5. Suggestions

Despite the language learning affordances of smartphones outlined in the research (see Godwin-Jones, 2020), this study revealed that the participants

remained unwilling or unready to meaningfully exploit the learning affordances of the devices. While smartphones possess real capabilities for computing, communication, and collaboration, "it is no easy task to harness [these capabilities] for the purpose of serious learning" (Godwin-Jones, 2017, p. 13), and the teacher's main role and challenge "is to provide to students the skills and knowledge to be informed and engaged online learners" (Godwin-Jones, 2017, p. 13). This paper concludes by making three suggestions as to how language teachers in Ireland can meet that challenge, at both second and third-level education.

5.1.   Dedicated periods of language learning on smartphones

Students should be encouraged to use their smartphones in class to experiment with language learning apps (such as Duolingo or Memrise). Students can share their experiences with different apps, evaluate them individually and as a group with the help of their teacher, and identify which apps best suit individual learning preferences. Such explicit focus on smartphone use will both expose learners to a variety of resources and improve their ability to evaluate the merits of the resources they encounter.

5.2.   Use of smartphones to complement 'traditional' learning

Smartphones can be used to support learning while engaged in other activities. For instance, using a smartphone to find collocations of a newly-learned word, or to quickly discover extra information about topics being discussed in textbooks, can help learners develop perceptions of smartphones as having value in complementing their general studies.

5.3.   Harnessing social media

Teachers could create social media accounts for their class on one or more platforms (such as Facebook or Instagram), and 'follow' accounts which produce content relevant to students' interests (such as a Spanish-language football page, a French news organisation, a Japanese language learning page, etc.). Checking these accounts will reveal the steady drip-feed of authentic, relevant second-language content and opportunities for interaction with both native speakers and learners of target languages, which social media offer. This will help learners perceive social media as venues where they can encounter and use their target languages.

6.   Conclusion

While teachers understandably shy away from smartphones in the classroom, smartphones will continue to be used heavily by learners in their everyday lives, and they cannot be normalised as learning resources if they are always ignored or forbidden. Steps such as those suggested above can help learners to become more active, informed, and judicious users of smartphones as language learning resources, improving their learning journeys within and beyond the classroom.

7.   Supplementary materials

- Link to survey
- Link to case study form
- Link to group interview schedule

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