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What Language to Teach with Mobile Devices

Mobile devices, as we’ve seen, may be drafted into the service of a variety of language learning approaches (from behaviourist through communicative to sociocultural approaches), linked to a series of MALL types (from content and tutorial to creation and communication MALL), and used to dish up a range of materials and activities (from e-books and grammar apps through to multimodal blogging and complex gaming). Having considered how language can be taught with mobile devices in the last chapter, we turn now to what aspects of language can be taught. In the process, we’ll draw together numerous examples of successful MALL projects. But before considering what language to teach through technology, we need to consider how technology changes language itself.

When language goes mobile

The mobile medium isn’t neutral. Mobile devices impact on the language we use (Baron, 2008, 2011; Kenning, 2007), with the resulting changes being a subset of the linguistic changes associated more broadly with digital technologies. In fact, it’s been suggested that digital tools require us to extend the concept of communicative competence to cover new ways of communicating and interacting (Chapelle, 2009). Mobile devices inflect and amplify these changes in their own ways.

Textspeak, friend or foe?

Although the term ‘netspeak’ is sometimes used to refer to online language (Crystal, 2006), the term textspeak, which refers specifically to the language used on mobile phones, is more common nowadays,
reflecting the fact that this linguistic phenomenon has become associated predominantly with mobile devices and SMS texting (as well as the rapidly spreading mobile IM apps that parallel texting). It’s a heavily abbreviated and often playful form of language which serves to increase speed (with abbreviations being faster to type), decrease messaging costs (by keeping within the SMS character limit), avoid misunderstandings (by adding emotional context through abbreviations like ‘lol’ and emoticons like 😊), and signal in-group membership (via the use of certain slang). While voice recognition and other new input mechanisms may eventually reduce the need for textspeak, there’s little doubt that a command of this kind of language is currently essential to everyday functioning in mobile environments, particularly in social channels involving synchronous communication.

It’s an easy target in the political and media discourses around falling literacy standards, but attacks on textspeak turn out to be very misguided. A growing body of research demonstrates that there is a positive correlation between students’ use of textspeak and their standard literacy skills (Kemp, 2011). Linguists suggest this is because you can only play with language rules, as is common in textspeak, if you already know what the rules are (Crystal, 2008, 2011; Plester et al., 2009). Research also shows that children and teenagers generally understand the distinction between textspeak and standard language (Crystal, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2008), which suggests that if they break the rules, they may well be doing so on purpose.

Given the importance of textspeak for mobile communication, and given its positive correlation with the development of standard language, teachers might adopt a codeswitching approach where they recognise the value of textspeak but offer guidance, as necessary, on when and where it’s appropriate (Dudeney et al., 2013). Of course, it may be that educators need to rethink where the boundaries of appropriate language use lie: if most teen feedback on the Yoza stories (see Chapter 4) is in textspeak, this could reflect the development of mobile literacy skills suited to the medium (Vosloo, 2012). Yet students also need to hone their ideas about appropriate language use: choosing an informal textspeak register in the wrong setting might suggest a shaky grasp of pragmatic competence. It all comes down to context – but, confusingly for both students and teachers, contexts and the linguistic expectations linked to them are in a state of flux.

Textspeak is slipping into ever more communication channels and spreading into advertising and the mainstream mass media. With its