Voice: The killer application of mobile learning

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ABSTRACT

Mobile learning is an exciting area. Many educational institutions are doing fascinating initiatives and cutting-edge pilot projects. Learning content is being now delivered in new and interesting ways, using the latest technology. However, this author believes that perhaps many of these initiatives are misguided. These projects are not necessarily using the most appropriate technologies for the problems they are trying to solve, for example the use of a mobile phone screen when a computer monitor would be better. The author believes that in some cases, the usefulness of the screen may be proportional to the size of the screen.

These projects, while sometimes revolutionary, may in this authors' opinion, solve problems that don't exist. They sometimes require custom devices, making them prohibitively expensive to scale to a large number of learners. They are interesting and forward-thinking, and will become very useful as the technology matures, but one could argue that they are technology for technology's sake. With the advent of a new era of devices (the iPhone, 3G phones, Android devices, the rumoured upcoming 3G iPhone etc) these applications will be more practical, and reach a much larger audience. But today, in 2008, the killer application of mobile learning is voice.

Author Keywords

assessment, language, mobile phone, instant messenger, podcast, voice biometrics

VOICE AS THE KILLER MOBILE LEARNING APPLICATION

In 2007, in an attempt to promote the use of oral Irish language, the Irish Minister for Education and Science announced a significant change to the proportion of marks awarded for oral (spoken) Irish in the State examinations. Further to this, Learnosity worked as technology partner in a project initiated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) and the governing body for the Irish language (Foras na Gaeilge) in an exciting mobile learning project. One of the aims of the mobile learning pilot project was to ascertain whether ICT, including mobile technology, could facilitate school-based oral assessment. This project was very successful, and will be continued in the 2008/2009 academic year.

The assessment of oracy in the state examinations of various languages is done through interview by a visiting examiner, the latter generally being a teacher from another school. This practice is already posing significant logistical challenges for schools, with the examinations commission finding it increasingly difficult to persuade teachers to act as examiners[1]. This is not only true in Ireland, but in almost every educational system worldwide.

In 2008, Learnosity will deliver similar voice based mobile learning projects with the Australian Federal, and New Zealand governments. The technology is also going to be used in India to examine spoken English ability in call centre workers[2]. This author believes that this project is solving a real problem, is significantly more scalable than the mobile learning projects that came before, and the "mobile" element brings a huge benefit over other alternatives.

Current uptake of mobile phones is astounding by any standard[3]. The mobile phone is an excellent device to deliver any e-learning content as it is simple, reliable and mobile networks have far greater penetration than broadband Internet. Phones are also available in developing nations where computing facilities and Internet connectivity may be non-existent.

Not only does mobile learning use technology that most, if not all, teenagers are thoroughly familiar with, mobile phones have an added advantage in the field of language learning, summed up eloquently by Clark Quinn cited in Shephard (2001);

"The mobile phone has one facility that makes it better than most PCs. It has been designed to deliver audio. You can listen to, or even talk with a real person. It is this mix of audio and text that make delivery of certain types of learning content possible."

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[1] http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/ireland/2007/0312/1173443050158_pf.html

[2] http://dqindia.ciol.com/content/wifi/2008/108040806.asp

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