Chapter 6
Mobile Games for Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Education, including the subset of language learning, has been greatly influenced by information and communication technologies. This influence manifests itself in the form of various paradigms, starting from distance or digital learning (d-learning) to electronic learning (e-learning) then mobile learning (m-learning) and eventually ubiquitous learning (u-learning). The integration of these paradigms with supportive techniques to enhance inclusion, engagement, and to overcome the classic problem of lack of motivation led to a series of innovations, culminated in the notion of educational mobile game applications. This chapter focuses on the roots of this emergent trend, including the elements of mobile technology and the aspect of gaming, and how instrumental are they in empowering and motivating learners. The relationship of mobile games with the concept of gamification is examined, and a few major challenges to building effective mobile game applications for language learners are highlighted for future attention.

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INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, the ability to communicate in more than one language is becoming more compelling. For example, in many parts of the globe, English language is the universal business language, and knowing English is a competitive advantage in several aspects. This drives many non-English speaking countries into paying great attention to teaching the English language at an early stage (Kachru, 2006). Apart from the business world, second languages like English can be essential for gaining further and continuous education. For example, most of the academic literature and scientific results are published in English.

In one sense, the ability of teaching and learning another language is becoming an instance of the more general problem of inclusion and empowerment. Those who have access to the necessary resources and enabling forces to learn other languages than their own mother tongues can enjoy more opportunities and prosperous careers. Those who have no access to resources and no exposure to positive forces may be at a disadvantage. Traditional schooling is a case in point. Traditional, face-to-face learning has served well the previous generations, provided that learners have access to local resources such as a school, qualified teachers and quality materials. Even when so, traditional teaching is perceived as boring (Jean & Simard, 2011), and without positive forces that drive their motivation and engagement, more and more learners are still susceptible to suffer from the natural difficulty of learning new languages. This situation leads to the setup where only a small part of the learners – who are gifted with intrinsic motivation and/or raised in a supportive environment – can reap the benefits of traditional settings in teaching and learning.

To remedy this situation, educators did not stop looking for new ways to close the gap and reach out to learners in different places, times, and contexts as well as to raise the learners' level of engagement and motivation. In the context of language learning, people moved from face-to-face learning, to distance and web-based learning, then mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) as a derivative of mobile learning, up to the use of games in game-based learning, and finally we are at a point where many of the games are built on mobile platforms and used for teaching languages. This construct of *mobile game applications for language learning* is the subject of this chapter.

Mobile games for language learning (MGLL) is still a new trend. Although it has gained the attention of researchers since the last decade, it is still not ubiquitous in the learning environment. MGLL is an instance of the revolution of mobile apps in almost all other domains, such as mobile banking, mobile governance and mobile health. The authors believe it is similarly going to penetrate society, and may be a valuable addition to the arsenal of teachers and learners if understood correctly