

Mobile Phone Based Learning: English for Speakers of a Other Languages



Project Evaluation: Executive Summary

City of London

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Bone Wells Urbecon Ltd

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About This Report

This report was written by Anspear, the City of London Delivery Innovation Team and Bone Wells Urbecon Ltd in order to document the results of a project in 2010 to test the impact of mobile phone based learning on both formal and informal English language activities in a Bangladeshi community in the City of London. This is the executive summary.

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- City of London Adult and Community Learning team

Full Document

The full report can be downloaded at <http://www.esd.org.uk/InnovationToolkit>

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Executive Summary

There has been significant population growth in England in recent years with much of this attributable to net migration¹. Declines in the population of White British and White Irish groups have been more than offset by an increase in other ethnic groups, resulting in a growing proportion of the population for whom English is a second language. There are significant implications for local authorities, communities and service providers. Poor English language skills can be a key barrier to accessing public services, can limit employability and hinder community cohesion.

In response to the challenge many councils and local organisations are supporting ESOL courses (English for Speakers of Other Languages). However there is evidence, certainly within the City of London, that signing up to even the most basic ESOL course can be a step too far for those in the most disadvantaged Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. Some fear the formality of signing up for an examined course while for others, their language skills and confidence fall well short of even the most basic ESOL levels. As a result many find themselves trapped, wanting to improve their English, but lacking the confidence to sign up for classes. This is perpetuated in situations where councils align funding to formal learning, focusing their resources entirely on achieving examination targets. If the most disadvantaged non-English speakers are to be effectively supported there is clearly a need for more informal, engaging, community and family orientated ways of learning English that can bridge the gap to formal ESOL classes.

In response to this need, the City of London partnered with Anspear to test an innovative mobile phone based learning application within the Bangladeshi community in the City of London. Learners were provided with interactive English language materials – word cards, audio clips, videos and word games that run on the memory card of any mobile phone. The learning content was enhanced with photographs of the local community, and tailored to the language requirements of participants.

¹ [Population Estimates by Ethnic Group, Office for National Statistics, Sept 2009](#)



The project ran for ten weeks, between January and April 2010 for two specific groups of learners; thirty predominantly Bangladeshi residents of a housing estate who at the time were not undertaking any formal tuition, and fourteen learners enrolled on a formal ESOL course run by Hackney Community College and sponsored by the City of London. The objective was to explore the impact of the mobile learning application in both formal and informal settings.

Learning software on the mobile phones tracked the participants' usage and progress. Questionnaires designed and distributed by independent evaluators Bone Wells Urbecon at the outset, mid-point and close of the project provided an insight into the broader social outcomes of the intervention.

Headline Findings

The mobile learning resources clearly increased the learners' levels of confidence in the use of the English language over the 12 weeks. The increase in confidence was greatest among the informal learners with the percentage who were 'confident' or 'very confident' at writing in English, doubling from 18% to 36% over the period. This result, in the absence of other formal learning, was solely attributable to the mobile phone based resources.

There was also an increase for the formal learners with those who were 'very confident' in writing and understanding other people also doubling from 11% to 22% over the period

The formal learners covered significantly more of the mobile resources over the project indicating that the combination of formal tuition, examination incentives and encouragement from their teachers and peers stimulated their use of the materials. The informal learners, by contrast, had no formal structure surrounding the use of the phones, and no incentive to use the phones as preparation for an exam. With this in mind the relatively high levels of use and the impact on their English skills and confidence was very encouraging.

Other key findings include that the mobile resources:

- **Increased participation**; there was significant demand for the service; in fact the project team could not meet the demand among the informal learners as part of this short evaluation project, even after doubling the number of participants.
- **Significantly boosted learning in between classes**; the phones clearly stimulated additional learning in between classes for the formal learners – with all learners accessing the materials in between classes at least 2-3 times a week and a third accessing the resources daily.
- **Changed learning times**; the logs showed significant learning outside the normal working day, particularly during the evening. Furthermore much of the mobile learning was 'bite size' averaging 10-15minutes and easily slotted in around other activities during the day and evening at times that suited them.
- **Encouraged Family learning**; all (100%) of participants reported sharing the phone with their families with some learners reporting that they used them to teach their young children basic English and others reporting that their children helped them to use the phone and understand its features.

- **Are an engaging way of learning**; around 90% of participants stated they would like to learn this way again. The more interactive, game-like exercises were clearly more popular, along with spelling practice. Themed exercises around 'Daily Life', 'Days of the Week' and 'Seasons and Weather' themes were also highly used.
- **A useful support tool for tutors**; feedback from the tutor was very positive; the mobile phone resources were considered an excellent aid to formal teaching.

There were also some **broader social outcomes** that were measured. These were typically higher for the formal learners:

- All of the formal learners and half of the informal learners reported that participation in the project had **increased their self-confidence**.
- 90% of the formal learners reported that during the activity they **made new friends and had an enjoyable time** compared to 55% of the informal learners – who were using it more individually.
- 80% of the formal learners felt **more confident to apply for jobs** as a result of increased English skills, compared to 20% of the informal learners
- There were some early signs of potential **progression** with around 36% of the informal learners reporting that they wanted to undertake further education and training as a result of the project.
- 70-80% of all participants reported that they were **more likely to access public services** (health, education, work and housing).
- 20% of the informal learners and 40% of the formal also reported they were **more likely to take part in other community activities**.
- Participants also noted that being part of the project gave them a **sense of belonging and integration**.

There were several potential areas of improvement identified, notably:

- Some of the formal learners stated that the English language materials were sometimes too easy for them, while some of the informal learners

reported some of the material was too difficult. There is a clear need to fine-tune the different levels of content downloaded on the phones to the individual learner. In particular, while the focus of the project was on supporting the transition to basic ESOL it was clear that for basic ESOL learners there is a need for content to support the transition to the next level.

- It was clear that the devices were used by other members of the family and as a result it would be useful for the phones to be able to support multiple users to actively encourage family learning. (This feature has since been added).

Conclusions

The project results were very encouraging and indicate that this form of mobile-based learning is a potential supplementary tool for tutors to support and enhance formal face-to-face learning. Training commissioners such as local authorities should consider asking bidders to incorporate this type of innovative, engaging approach into their service offerings.

Equally encouraging is the use of these resources in informal settings. Some of the informal learners had never tried to write or speak in English before participation in this activity. The mobile phone resources helped them to record and listen to their voice when speaking in English and to take their first steps in learning the language. Local authorities and community development workers should consider this type of activity in disadvantaged areas where there are growing numbers of non-English speakers. In combination with other community work, mobile phone based ESOL clearly has the potential to encourage family learning, progression onto formal training and employment, use of public services and community cohesion.