Transforming Mobile Phones into Literacy Tools

A preview of UNESCO’s Mobile Literacy Landscape Review

Rebecca Kraut
Independent Education Consultant
UNESCO Mobile Literacy Landscape Review

- Forthcoming publication: *Reading Without Books*

- Review of 15 mobile learning projects that aim to advance literacy and learning in the developing world

- Detailed description of each project, followed by analysis of successful characteristics and challenges

- This presentation will provide a preview of the publication by focusing on one type of project: **Basic Literacy for Adults**
Adult Illiteracy

- 774 million illiterate adults worldwide
- Almost two-thirds are women
- Vast majority live in the developing world
- Number of illiterate adults fell by just 1% since 2000
- Mostly due to population growth, but also inadequate adult literacy programmes

*Few countries offer genuine second chances to illiterate adults.* (UNESCO, 2014)
The Problem with Adult Literacy Programmes

- Notoriously ineffective at achieving lasting gains
- World Bank has significantly reduced funding since 1990’s
- Short duration, typically < 1 year
- Participants learn basic literacy skills but read and write infrequently after the course ends
- Everyday reading activities are needed to sustain literacy
- Without regular practice, neo-literate people quickly lose their skills
Solution? Mobile Phone Training

ADULT LITERACY COURSE

+ MOBILE PHONE TRAINING

= LITERACY GAINS & RETENTION

Several projects reviewed show that when you add a mobile component to a basic adult literacy course, both short-term and long-term results improve.
Why Mobile Phones?

According to the UIS Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP):

Using a mobile phone is the most frequent way people in developing countries practice their literacy skills.

Text messaging is a literacy activity in and of itself.

Mobile phones can provide both the means and the motivation for adults to practice literacy on an everyday basis.
SMS for Adult Literacy Practice

- Projects in Niger, Senegal, Afghanistan, Pakistan
- All use basic handsets and SMS technology
- All target very poor people living in rural areas
- Some target women and girls specifically
Niger Project ABC

Partnership between Tufts University, Oxford University and the Niger branch of Catholic Relief Services (CRS), an international humanitarian organization based in the USA.
Mobile phone training added to adult literacy course

People taught to access agricultural market info via SMS

LITERACY GAINS:

ABC villages scored **10-20% higher** than non-ABC villages on **post-literacy tests**

- Immediately after the course AND 7 months later

COMMUNITY BENEFITS:

ABC villages sold **more livestock** at **higher prices**

ABC villages grew **more diverse crops** and sold **more cash crops**

COST: Added $1.50 per student per year to the cost of the literacy course
Afghanistan

Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL)

NGO dedicated to promoting access to education and health services for women and children in Afghanistan.
Afghanistan

Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL)

- Mobile phone training added to adult literacy course
- Women receive daily text messages from teachers and respond

LITERACY GAINS:
- Mobile component greatly accelerated literacy gains
  - 83% of students passed two levels of the course after 4 months
  - Without the mobile component, two levels takes ~18 months

COMMUNITY BENEFITS:
- Normalizing female technology use
- Participants felt safer and less isolated with mobile phone use and ownership

COST: Increased costs of literacy course by ~25%
Success Factors

- Simple, low-cost technology
- Integration with existing educational programmes
- Local languages
- Implementation by local community-based organization
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Tangible benefits – economic & social
Challenges

- Developing local language content = $$ + time

- Some languages not easily supported, require transliteration

- All projects are small-scale...BUT:
  - Unlike many pilot programmes, these are low-cost, low-tech and work with existing infrastructure
  - Relatively easy to add mobile phone training to adult literacy programmes
  - Doing so may significantly improve results
This presentation is a preview of the forthcoming landscape review, to be published soon.

Will be launched in conjunction with UNESCO’s recent mobile reading study:
- Reading in the Mobile Era: A survey of mobile reading in 7 developing countries

Please keep an eye out for both reports!