

## *Original Paper*

# Mobile Learning in Civil Servant English Proficiency Training: Advantages, Challenges, and Implementation

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### **Abstract**

*This study takes Hainan Free Trade Port as the background to explore the potential and applicability of mobile learning in improving civil servants' English proficiency. While mobile learning offers many advantages, such as flexibility, convenience, personalization and collaborative learning opportunities, there are still challenges that need to be addressed, including technology infrastructure, data security and digital literacy. Using a specially designed WeChat E-learning training program as an illustrative case, the paper demonstrates how mobile platforms can cater to the unique English training needs of civil servants. This tailored program focuses on individualized learning, interactive sessions, and the establishment of a learning community, aiming to improve their intercultural communication skills crucial for international collaborations. The study highlights that while mobile learning shows great promise in the field of English training for civil servants, adequate support, resources, and optimal integration with traditional training methods are essential to take full advantage of its benefits. In addition, the study points to the need to explore innovative strategies for optimizing mobile learning experiences in the future and assess their long-term impact on civil service performance.*

### **Keywords**

*mobile learning, civil servants, English proficiency, WeChat*

## **1. Introduction**

Mobile learning, utilizing mobile technology to facilitate learning activities, has emerged as a promising approach in education. Its application spans various domains, including civil servant English proficiency training. In the context of the Hainan Free Trade Port, where the need for enhanced English language abilities among civil servants is evident, this paper aims to explore the potential of mobile learning in civil servant English training and address the advantages and challenges associated with its implementation.

## 2. Background and Rationale

In April 2018, the establishment of the Hainan Free Trade Port was announced, signifying increased international exchanges and foreign affairs activities conducted by Hainan government departments. English, as a widely recognized international language, has become the lingua franca for international communication and cooperation. Therefore, popularizing and improving the English proficiency and comprehensive application ability of civil servants in Hainan Province is an objective requirement to enhance the level of government management and services, strengthen international exchanges and cooperation, and contribute to the development of the free trade port.

In January 2019, the Hainan Provincial Government issued the “Notice on the Comprehensive Enhancement of Citizens’ Foreign Language Proficiency Action Plan for Hainan Province,” which called for promoting the improvement of foreign language proficiency and application ability in four major areas: party and government organs, schools, news media, and public service window units. This initiative aimed to drive and promote foreign language learning, training, and exchange throughout society. Subsequently, in May 2020, to comprehensively improve the foreign language proficiency of civil servants in Hainan Province and better serve the construction of the free trade port, the Organization Department of the Hainan Provincial Party Committee issued the “Action Plan for Comprehensive Enhancement of Foreign Language Proficiency of Civil Servants in Hainan Province 2020-2025.” The plan explicitly states that by the end of 2025, civil servants under the age of 40 should be able to engage in basic foreign language communication, while civil servants over the age of 40 should be able to master basic daily language and international cultural etiquette. Personnel engaged in foreign-related work should possess industry-specific foreign language knowledge and be able to use at least one foreign language for industry-related communication. In leadership teams and middle-level cadres of units with significant foreign-related business, a certain proportion of civil servants should be proficient in the use of a foreign language.

It is evident that, against the backdrop of accelerating the construction of the free trade port in Hainan Province, civil servants, as representatives of the government in foreign exchanges, face the urgent task of strengthening their English language abilities. It is necessary to make concerted efforts to build a team of civil servants with high comprehensive qualities, strong professional abilities, and excellent English proficiency. To effectively enhance the English proficiency of civil servants, the first and foremost prerequisite is to understand and grasp the current situation and needs of the English language abilities of the civil servant workforce and seek corresponding strategies. Based on a comprehensive understanding of the current level and potential for improvement of civil servants’ English proficiency in Hainan Province, including their language proficiency, learning habits, needs, and weaknesses, this research aims to design a mobile learning platform that meets the demands of information-age civil servants for mobile learning, fragmented learning, and personalized learning. This study explores effective methods to increase English knowledge and enhance English use ability of civil servants in Hainan Province, and further to improve their English proficiency and intercultural communication

competence, thereby making contributions to the prosperity of Hainan Free Trade Port.

### **3. Concept and Characteristics of Mobile Learning**

Mobile learning, also called m-learning, is a concept of education method that enables learners to study at anytime anywhere by using mobile technologies and mobile devices (Kukulka-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). Through this approach, learners can take part in diverse activities such as getting access to learning materials, engaging in discussions and interactions, and receiving feedback, all by means of mobile devices (Sharples, 2007).

Mobile learning has three extinct features, i.e. flexibility and convenience. Flexibility is the first prominent feature. It brings great convenience to civil servants as it allows them to participate in the educational activities at their convenience and liberate them from restrictions of the traditional fixed schedules and classroom settings (Pachler et al., 2009). Therefore, civil servants can learn even in some time fragments such as the commuting hours or during breaks, which can maximize the learning opportunities (Kukulka-Hulme & Traxler, 2005).

Convenience is the second crucial feature of mobile learning. By providing abundant online learning resources and materials, mobile learning allows civil servants to learn conveniently by using their mobile devices and do not have to carry computers or physical textbooks (Sharples, 2007). The convenient access to learning activates and materials breaks the limit of physical and fixed type of learning and makes continuous learning feasible even outside the formal training programs (Traxler, 2007).

The third important feature of mobile learning is personalization. Learners can customize learning activities according to their own needs, proficiency and preferences (Ally, 2009). Mobile learning offers an adaptive learning mode so civil servants can choose suitable learning materials, approaches and pacing based on their individualized goals.

In conclusion, mobile learning is an effective approach to improve English proficiency of civil servants as it provides opportunities for them to participate in learning activities at their convenience and take on learning at anytime anywhere. By leveraging mobile devices and technology, mobile learning transforms the learning experience, making it more accessible, engaging, and tailored to the needs of individual learners.

### **4. Need Analysis in the Context of Hainan Province**

For a long time, research on foreign language proficiency and competence has mainly focused on the teaching field, with students or teachers as the research subjects, mostly serving the purpose of foreign language instruction. As a result, research on niche groups such as civil servants have been extremely limited. In foreign literature, a search using keywords such as “civil servants” and “foreign language proficiency” on platforms like Sci-Hub and Library Genesis yields very few relevant documents, and research specifically on how civil servants’ foreign language abilities contribute to urban development,

especially in free trade zones, is not yet visible.

In China, some scholars have conducted surveys to investigate the English language usage and training needs of civil servants (e.g., Li, 2003; Jiang, 2009; Deng & Wang, 2014; Liu, 2015). Zeng (2004) summarized the reasons for the failure of civil servant training and provided corresponding measures. Xiao (2008) analyzed the characteristics of English speaking skills among civil servants in detail. Wang (2009) provided recommendations on how to effectively conduct English training for civil servants at different proficiency levels. The aforementioned studies primarily focus on the demands and strategies of English learning for civil servants, and most of them are macro-level studies conducted by institutions such as party schools and administrative colleges rather than English teachers in universities. Therefore, conducting language proficiency surveys and analysis research by university teachers with rich frontline teaching experience and a deep understanding of English learning principles can yield more targeted and professional findings, leading to more effective research outcomes.

Some scholars have also conducted research on the English language abilities of civil servants in different regions. Li (2003), using a questionnaire on the foreign language communication abilities of civil servants in Chengdu, investigated their English proficiency levels, analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of existing English training methods, and explored relatively innovative training methods. Jiang (2009), starting with the current situation of English knowledge among civil servants in Guangxi, demonstrated the necessity of developing English oral communication skills for civil servants by analyzing the relationship between language and communicative competence, and proposed corresponding methods and suggestions. Xiao (2009), using Changchun City as an example, pointed out the problems in English training for civil servants and proposed solutions based on the current state of civil servants' English language abilities. Chen (2012) discussed the problems in civil servant English education and the factors affecting their English proficiency using Shaanxi Province as a case study, and proposed related measures for the integration of civil servant English education through training, assessment, and application. Liu (2015), based on a survey using the "Questionnaire on the Use of Foreign Languages by Chinese Civil Servants," investigated the current status of language usage and foreign language abilities among civil servants in Anhui Province, analyzed the demand for foreign language abilities among Chinese civil servants, and explored corresponding strategies.

Clearly, the research background of the above-mentioned studies on civil servant English proficiency differs from that of Hainan Province. The development of the free trade zone in Hainan has greatly accelerated its openness and development. With the increasing frequency of international exchanges and cooperation, it is urgent for civil servants, as representatives of the government in foreign exchanges, to improve their English language knowledge and application abilities. It is necessary to explore and implement a set of effective methods and approaches. Furthermore, although the aforementioned studies to varying degrees address strategies for improving civil servant English proficiency, their focus is mostly limited to the selection of teaching materials, the creation of teaching

environments, and the use of teaching methods in traditional offline training. There is a lack of research on the application of online or mobile platforms in civil servant English training. In light of this, the development of an English mobile learning platform and resources in this project will align with the learning habits of information-age civil servants, meet their needs for mobile, fragmented, and personalized learning, and effectively improve the English language proficiency of civil servants in Hainan Province, thereby accelerating the construction of the free trade port.

### **5. Application of Mobile Learning in Civil Servant English Competency Training**

**Access to Learning Resources:** Mobile learning provides civil servants with access to a wide range of learning resources that support English language proficiency development. Through mobile devices and internet connectivity, civil servants can download and access learning materials, e-books, audiovisual resources, and language learning applications. The availability of these abundant learning materials allows civil servants to learn English conveniently according to their specific needs and at their own pace.

**Personalized Learning:** This advantageous learning mode ensures mobile learning can cater to civil servants' specific needs. By using users' historical data and intelligent algorithms, learning application can offer individualized suggestions, deliver adaptive learning sources and create personalized paths (Hwang et al., 2015). Accordingly, civil servants can concentrate on the areas to be improved, receive tailored feedback and set their own pace according to their learning preferences and styles.

**Interactive Practice:** Mobile learning promote interactive learning by providing civil servants the opportunities to practice their oral and writing English competence through interactions in the language activities. Language learning programs involve pronunciation guide, language games and interactive activities, all of which stimulate learners to actively engage in and provide them with immediate feedback. Through the interactive practice conducted on mobile devices, civil servants will be able to improve their English proficiency outside classrooms and enhance their communication ability (Wu et al., 2012).

**Collaborative Learning Opportunities:** Civil servants can take full use of mobile learning to participate in collaborative learning and language interactions. Mobile learning platforms can provide discussion forums, virtual language learning communities and social networks that allow civil servants to interact with other learners, take part in group discussions and practice in the language activities. Collaborative learning encourages learners to support each other, share knowledge and respect different cultures, and improves not only their language proficiency but also their cross-cultural communication competence.

**Progress Assessment and Feedback:** Mobile learning can develop assessment functions that can assess learners' learning progress and give immediate feedback. Civil servants can evaluate their learning progress and recognize the areas to be improved by using language tests, speech recognition technique and automated quizzes. Furthermore, the feedback mechanism enables mobile learning applications to provide immediate feedback about how to correct learners' grammatical, vocabulary and pronunciation

errors, thereby promoting learners to gain greater progress (Wu et al., 2012).

## **6. Design of a WeChat Official Account- E-learning**

A comprehensive E-learning training project is particularly developed to improve the English proficiency of Hainan government officials. This project is delivered through a WeChat official account that provide individualized English language trainings for the purpose of improving government officials' English competence and promoting their career development.

To meet civil servants' different needs and language skills, this WeChat account provides diversified learning materials and resources, including grammar guide, vocabulary exercises, interactive lessons, and real-world reading and listening resources. Besides, these learning resources are designed meticulously to help government officials to master English knowledge and hone their English skills for more fluent use of English in the government settings, including diplomatic language, negotiation ability and cross-cultural communication.

One advantage of the E-learning project is the personalization of learning plans. After government officials register on this platform, this project can evaluate these government officials' current English level and then set corresponding learning objectives. This assists the WeChat official account to develop a customized learning plan that delivers suitable learning activities and materials to the government officials. Therefore, the training programs can adapt to the learners' personal needs and learning pace and promote their progress at a specific speed.

Additionally, this E-learning training program also provides the opportunities of interactions and discussions on the WeChat platform. Civil servants can take part in discussions with other learners and English teachers, seeks for help on language learning at any time and receive timely feedback on their practice and homework. Such interaction atmosphere encourages learners to actively participate in discussions and progress continuously.

This E-learning training program also takes rewarding mechanisms to incentivize and encourage government officials to enthusiastically take part in the training activities. These mechanisms involve achievement badges, progress tracking and milestone based rewards. This program also conducts regular assessment on government officials' learning outcomes and then offers immediate feedback. This helps government officials to reflect on their English learning and make corresponding changes and improvement.

By encouraging cooperation and communication, this E-learning training program contributes to the formation of a learning community among the civil servants. The WeChat account platform organizes language exchange groups, discussion forums and virtual learning corners for government officials to share their learning experiences, discuss with others and hone their English skills. This cooperative learning atmosphere is beneficial for fostering mutual support and cultivating a sense of camaraderie among the civil servants.

Through these above efforts, this E-learning training program ultimately aims to endow Hainan government officials to master necessary English skills and further to achieve fluent communication in the international environment and promote prosperity of Hainan Free Trade Port. A higher English proficiency will help them to improve intercultural communication, enhance negotiation success and promote cross-national cooperation. By enhancing Hainan government officials' English proficiency necessary to international communication, this E-learning program hopes to make contributions to the construction of Hainan Free Trade Port.

This E-learning training program is expected to create fresh government officials with higher English competence, enhanced intercultural communication skills, higher motivation and autonomy in learning, and better fulfillment of responsibilities by providing high-quality support and services. In sum, this program will cultivate more proficient and confident English speakers for Hainan government and promote fluent communication and effective cooperation in international cooperation.

### **7. Advantages of Mobile Learning in Civil Servant English Competency Training**

**Flexibility and Convenience:** This advantage of mobile learning allows civil servants to take part in English learning training on their own terms. Civil servants can download learning resources, take part in exercises and receive feedback anytime anywhere through the mobile devices. Besides, civil servants can integrate English learning in their daily schedules and learn even at the small time segments, thereby improvement knowledge acquisition and activity engagement (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005).

**Personalized Learning:** Learners can customize learning activities according to their own needs, proficiency and preferences. Mobile learning offers an adaptive learning mode so civil servants can choose suitable learning materials according to their individualized goals and language competence. Personalized learning ensures civil servants emphasize the language areas to be improved and improve their English skills efficiently.

**Access to Various Learning Resources:** To improve civil servants' English skills, mobile learning encompasses various learning resources, such as e-books, online courses, English learning applications, interaction videos and other digital resources, with an attempt to adapt to different learning types of learners (Wu et al., 2012). Therefore, civil servants have a broad scope of choice and can choose the optimal resources that align with their goals and preferences.

**Interactive and Engaging Activities:** Through mobile learning, civil servants have opportunities to take part in engaging and interaction activities to hone their English skills. Mobile learning applications encompass pronunciation guidance, language games and interactive exercises, all of which encourage learners' active engagement and give timely feedback. While increasing interest of English learning, these interactive activities enhance civil servants' English understanding and use competence.

**Collaborative Learning Opportunities:** Civil servants can take full use of mobile learning to participate in collaborative learning and language interactions. Mobile learning platforms can provide discussion

forums, virtual language learning communities and social networks that allow civil servants to interact with other learners, take part in group discussions and practice in the language activities. Collaborative learning encourages learners to support each other, share knowledge and respect different cultures, and improves not only their language proficiency but also their cross-cultural communication competence. Continuous Learning and Progress Tracking: Through mobile learning, civil servants can set their own learning goals, learn continuously, track their progress and receive timely feedback about their progress. Mobile learning apps always have assessment functions so that civil servants can assess their language levels and seek for improvement in their weak areas (Wu et al., 2012). Therefore, civil servants can improve their skills continuously and ultimately achieved their goals in English learning.

### **8. Challenges of Mobile Learning in Civil Servant English Competency Training**

**Technological Infrastructure:** The availability and dependability of technological infrastructure is a critical challenge for civil servants to get access to mobile learning. Regions and organizations are in different technological infrastructure conditions, leading to disparities in residents' access to stable internet resources and availability to mobile devices (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017). Therefore, in some regions, unreliable or insufficient technological infrastructure may impede the civil servants from taking effective use of mobile learning to improve their English skills (Ally, 2009)..

**Digital Literacy and Skills:** Civil servants may face challenges in adapting to mobile learning platforms and utilizing the technology effectively. Limited digital literacy and technological skills can impede their ability to navigate mobile learning apps, access learning materials, and engage in interactive activities. Providing adequate training and support in digital literacy skills becomes essential to ensure civil servants can fully leverage mobile learning resources (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017).

**Data Security and Privacy:** Mobile learning involves the use of personal mobile devices and the transfer of sensitive information. Ensuring data security and privacy is a critical concern in civil servant English competency training. Organizations must implement robust security measures to protect personal and confidential information, comply with data protection regulations, and address potential privacy risks associated with mobile learning.

**Pedagogical Design and Quality:** The design and quality of mobile learning materials and activities are crucial for effective learning outcomes. It is essential to develop pedagogically sound content that aligns with the specific language learning needs of civil servants (Ally, 2009). Ensuring the quality and relevance of mobile learning resources, as well as incorporating effective instructional strategies, can be a challenge in the context of civil servant English competency training (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017).

**Motivation and Engagement:** Sustaining motivation and engagement in mobile learning can be a challenge for civil servants. The self-directed nature of mobile learning requires individuals to take ownership of their learning, which may not come naturally to everyone (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017). Lack of motivation, distractions, and competing priorities can impact the consistent engagement and commitment to mobile learning activities (Sharples, 2007).

Social and Collaborative Learning Opportunities: Mobile learning, while offering various advantages, can present challenges in fostering social and collaborative learning experiences. Engaging in meaningful interactions, peer feedback, and group collaboration can be more difficult in the mobile learning environment compared to face-to-face settings (Ally, 2009).

It is crucial to improve positive effect of language learning by striking a balance between collaborative learning opportunities and individualized learning (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017).

## 9. Conclusion

In summary, mobile learning has a large potential in improving the English competence of civil servants, especially for civil servants working at Hainan Free Trade Port. This paper emphasizes the strengths of mobile learning such as convenience, flexibility, personalization, collaborative learning opportunities, and interactive language practice. Mobile devices and technology will assist civil servants to get access to enormous learning resources and materials, take part in interactive exercises and cultivate peer cooperation, and ultimately achieve the goal of improving English competence.

On the other hand, to guarantee smooth practicing of mobile learning among civil servants, it is critical to address some challenges faced by mobile learning, such as insufficient technological infrastructure, data security and privacy, digital literacy and skills, motivation and participation, pedagogical design and quality, and opportunities of social and cooperative learning. To address these challenges, it needs adequate resources and great support, such as dependable technological infrastructure, powerful security measures, digital literacy training, high-quality education resources, and approaches to stimulate learners' motivation and participation.

To take full use of mobile learning, related training organization and management departments should promote development of mobile learning technologies, reinforce guidance and supervision on mobile learning, and provide strong support. The combination between conventional training approaches and mobile learning will effectively help civil servants to improve their English proficiency, enhance their international communication skills, improve their work performance and contribute to their professional development.

Future research needs to emphasize investigating creative methods for optimizing mobile learning in English trainings targeted at civil servants. Furthermore, it is of great significance to study the effectiveness of mobile learning in improving civil servants' English competence and overall performance and its enduring influence as it will provide evidence for decision-making.

In conclusion, mobile learning has a great potential in equipping civil servants with required English competence that helps them to better fulfill their responsibly in promoting development of Hainan Free Trade Port. By embracing mobile learning, civil servants can cultivate their language abilities, foster cross-cultural communication, and contribute to the success of the free trade port's development.

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