REVIEW ARTICLE

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL): Methods, Merits, Demerits and Future Direction

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ABSTRACT

The practicality and popularity of mobile technology and the explosion of applications, have given them one of the leading roles in language teaching as in the other fields of everyday life. Additionally, English language Learners trough using mobile devices and its apps have an access to English resources no matter where they are and what they are doing. While there is considerable enthusiasm for using mobile devices and apps to support learning with their multimedia capabilities, portability, connectivity, and flexibility, there is a lack of research for those language teachers/learners interested in MALL especially in developing country. In this article after a brief overview of MALL generally, the best methods and some activities of using mobile technology in learning/teaching environment are discussed. Then this paper attempt to show the merits and demerits of applying mobile devices in language learning. Therefore, Language learners/teachers should be aware of the positive and negative aspects of MALL. Moreover, future direction of research in MALL to those interested in utilizing them in language learning will be explored briefly.

Keywords: Mobile Assisted Language Learning, Merits, Demerits, Methods

1.   Introduction

In a very broad sense, for as long as formal instruction has existed, there has been an interest in freeing learning from the constraints of time and place. Clay tablets, scrolls, then much later printed books were the first technologies employed to meet this challenge. In the latter part of the 20th century desktop computers, laptops, notebooks, and web-based applications greatly facilitated flexible access to language learning materials. The advent of hand-held computer-based devices gave rise to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) as we know it today. Since the mid-1990s, MALL has focused on the exploitation of five mobile technologies: pocket electronic dictionaries, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, MP3 players, and most recently ultra-portable tablet PCs.

We live in a world that the mobile technology develops at so fast speed that we have difficulty following. In only a few years the mobile market has changed drastically with the advent of smart phones with android system and Apple products with iOS system such as iPad and iPhone, and the number of people that

own these kinds of devices is growing at a fast rate especially among young people. Besides, these apps are developed in terms of learners' different purposes. Also, using apps on mobile devices to learn English also breaks the restriction of time and place (Subian, 2014). It means that students can learn English at any time and in any place. As a result, mobile devices are becoming a kind of important tools for students to learn English. On the other hand, English, as the most prominent language in the world, is playing an important role in our country. For the current students, it is a necessity to have a good ability of English, because of academic and job factors. For example, there are many majors need English to support such as international trade, e-commerce and information technology, and a majority of companies in our country are interested in the graduates who have excellent ability of English. With the accelerated development of Apps about learning English and the popularization of mobile devices among English, they have become increasingly interested in the learning benefits that mobile devices with their apps bring. Beyond all the benefits of MALL, according to the relevant researches, the Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) can not only enhance students' English ability, but also increase students' learning motivation. Seemingly, it is helpful and efficient for students using mobile devices to learn English by themselves.

2.   Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Historical Background and Research Findings: When, in 1973, the mobile devices were invented for the first time, no one ever thought some day they would become an important part of routine life. In today's world, mobiles are considered as pocket friend and a necessity for every individual. Mobile technology and applications has brought the entire world into the Pocket. In this era of technology, gadgets, innovations and digital world, no one can deny the presence of mobile phones in normal human life. Besides communication, it also provides recreation, entertainment and information as well. Use of Mobile phones has connected people all across the globe. Now Mobile phone are used for learning, watching movies, social networking, Bank funds transfer, accessing desired information, online admissions and much more, so it became a crucial part of our lives. Nobody can deny the radical changes which we are viewing in our lives. This is quite pertinent in the field of education, language teaching and language learning.

The first use of MALL took place in 1980's when Twarog and Pereszlenyi used telephones to provide distant language learners with feedback and assistance. According to Colpaert (2004) mobile learning environment might be: face-to-face; distance; online; self-paced; calendar-based. MALL can be defined as use of mobile phones in language learning and language teaching. Mobile phone devices have opened a new horizon in the area pertinent to learning of language and mobile technology which is known as Mobile Assisted Language Learning. Areas of mobile-based language learning are diverse among which the most common ones are vocabulary, listening, grammar, phonetics, reading comprehension, etc.

There are varios studies which have been conducted on mobile and their contributions to language learning. In addition, scholars forwarded their views regarding the significance of mobile to develop learners' language skills. One of the traditional applications includes its use for the delivery of content for language learning. For example, researchers adopted text messages as a means of providing vocabulary practice for quizzes and surveys (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Norbrook & Scott, 2003), and for mini-lessons (Thornton & Houser, 2001, 2005). One survey into the use of mobile phones revealed that Japanese learners preferred their mobile phones over desktop PCs or PDAs for exchanging emails. Mobile-based email has also been used to encourage vocabulary learning and web-based video clips have been used to learn idioms through mobile phones (Thornton & Houser, 2005). Moreover, Taiwanese learners found the mobile learning manageable as they could enjoy "bite-size-chunks" of learning contents through the relatively small screen (Chen, Hsieh &Kinshuk, 2008).

In addition to content delivery, other studies utilized mobile devices for the purpose of promoting learner-learner interaction. For instance, Dias (2002a) offered a web-board accessible via mobile phone so that learners could exchange text-based asynchronous exchanges. A theoretically significant feature of mobile devices lies in their potential for situated learning (Kukulska-Hulme&Traxler, 2005). As language earning does not only inside the classroom but also occurs outside of classroom, this also encourages context-driven learning. Moreover, mobile devices minimize the separation between in-class and out-of-class learning

(Reinders& Lewis, 2009). In terms of the gained linguistic knowledge and skills, most of the reviewed papers examine vocabulary acquisition, listening and speaking skills, and language acquisition in more general terms.

The review finds several suggestions for language learning benefits in the use of mobile language learning, such as integrating the mobile technology in both formal and informal contexts; the 'fun' moment when engaging learners in authentic learning contexts; the learners' contribution to the creation of the learning content; the use of mobile devices to support the practice of achieving listening and speaking skills effectively etc. Often the usefulness of the mobile technology use for vocabulary acquisition is measured by surveying learners' attitudes. There are also a number of studies attempting to analyze the outcome in terms of learners' language proficiency. However, as most studies are implemented within a short period of time and involve a small number of participants, results are yet inconclusive in this respect. Studies focusing on grammar learning, pronunciation and writing skills are underrepresented in the reviewed literature.

However there are the papers which analyze mobile technology applications on language acquisition in general terms (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Hsu, 2012), often indicate positive attitudes towards the mobile technology use and suggest better results in terms of language proficiency. Very little attention is devoted to individuals' language learning strategies and learning styles when employing mobile devices for their language learning. This knowledge can have a crucial impact on both educators, when for example designing language learning activities adopting mobile devices (development of new applications and intelligent tutorial systems for mobile devices for language learners) and learners, as they can achieve higher proficiency.

In the following lines it has been tried to demonstrate the methods and practices in MALL. As learning English is considered a main factor for professional success and a criterion for being educated in many communities, providing more convenient environment for people to learn English is one of the strategic educational goals towards improving the students' achievement and supporting differentiation of learning needs.

3.   Methods and Practices in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Teachers of English as a foreign language who want to develop successful lessons face numerous challenges, including large class sizes and inadequate instructional materials and technological support. One of the aims of this article is to describe the methods and activities of using mobile phones as an effective method of teaching foreign language. Additionally, there are some practical ways to use mobile phones to support FL learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Most of the activities will work with most mobile phones and do not require special knowledge or additional software or hardware.

3. 1   Camera (for photo, video recording and editing): One of the easiest ways to use a mobile phone for learning is to record samples of the target language by taking pictures. Students can take pictures of English text by using the Camera feature on their mobile phones. They can then make a collage of the images or upload the pictures. If students do not have a data connection, they can transfer the pictures to a computer and upload them from there.

3.2   Audio/ video player and Voice recorders: An audio/ video player could be used for language podcasts, listening to audio books, watching language educational videos for the sake of practice. Voice recorders can help students rehearse and record multiple examples of their own speech and other people's speech; record student radio, for example, as part of a class activities; create mini-stories or longer stories either individually or as a part of a group; and record speech samples for feedback and exchange them. Similarly, with a camera, students can capture communicative situations and then analyze them and work with them. They can also create their own mini-stories for evaluation and be creative with role-playing (for example, stand-up comedy episodes.)

3.3   Game-based learning: Game-based learning is another theme for mobile learning in which learning materials are so designed to be integrated with aspects of physical environment. In such environments, learning activities are facilitated using the mobile technology which serves as a link between the real world of knowledge and the visual world of the game.

3.4   SMS and texting capabilities isnd video messaging (MMS): SMS-based learning is another development in the use of wireless technologies in education in which receiving wanted text messages

supports learning outside of classroom and helps learners benefit from their teacher's experimentation with mobile technology.

Some other popular tools of mobile-assisted language learning would include: Email, Web browser, Note-taking tools as well as GPS and other location aware capabilities of our mobile devices.

Collaborative learning is one of the characteristics of MALL. That is, different learners are able exchange their knowledge, skills and attitudes through interaction. Collaborative learning helps the learners to support, motivate and evaluate each other to achieve substantial amounts of learning, the property which is almost absent in other kinds of learning. One can attain a good collaborative approach simply by using a mobile device as an environment for learning, which is, of course, highly dependent of the users than the devices. Devices, in fact, act as pencils and calculators which are the basic equipment in a learning process of a student. What is important, here, is the communication between the learners, as an important factor in language learning is the interaction in the target language.

Moreover, there are a set of MALL tasks including a collaborative multimedia dictionary, a bank of idioms, a student radio (where students recorded interviews with professionals and experts in various areas), a scavenger hunt that focused on vocabulary building, and some other mobile-assisted language learning tasks that could be completed only with the help of mobile devices where students could collaborate on both in class and out-of-class activities.

Looking beyond the guidelines of using mobile devices through the process of language learning/teaching, the inclusion of the following elements in the design and activities of MALL will be recommended: Individual and collaborative tasks, Learner-generated linguistic artifacts, Game-like real-life communicative tasks, Expert facilitation and guidance whenever needed and possible, A rich feedback mechanism that would include both delayed and immediate feedback, Focus on authentic language practice.

These activities for using mobile phones for foreign language learning generally focus on developing the four skills and in many cases integrate speaking with listening and reading with writing. The material and activities can be modified to conform to different syllabi and are easily adaptable for different ages, learning levels, and interests.

4.   Merits of MALL

The expansions of the mobile related technologies have cemented the options and path of potential and possibilities in language learning.According to (Ally, 2004; Holliday, 1999; Roschelle, 2003; Sharples, 2002; Sharples, Taylor, &Vavoula, 2010) for learning of second language Mobile phone technology possess many magnificent advantages. Mobile phone devices can add variety in different language learning environments and situations and through informatics and social activities learners' attention can be grasped and engaged (Roschelle, 2003).The main merits of mobile learning are accessibility, immediacy, interactivity and situating of instructional activities (Ogata & Yano, 2005). Accessibility refers to the extent to which every learner owes the mobile. These days almost most of the learners are having the technology regardless of the place they are living. In addition, as the technology is available in most places, except remote areas, learners can be connected and extended their opportunity to learn immediately. Mobile learning and Mobile technology are much better for activities which are beyond the class room and outside the classroom. Through these activities original and practical experiences of life can be bonded with technology. Additionally informal learning can be done though mobile phone which can help students improve their language learning and learning skills. Others have explained six causes of MALL's as motivational factor for language learners i.e. hold , possession, fun learning being communicative, contextual learning, contextual persistence.

Taking the above into consideration, two main characteristics of mobile phones are: portability and connectivity. Portability enables the users to move mobile phones and bring learning materials, whereas connectivity means that the device must have capability of being connected and communicated with the learning website by means of wireless network of the device to access learning material including short message service and mobile e-mail to transfer information between instructors and learners. There are, as well, other advantages provided by mobile phones such as: flexibility low cost, small size, user-friendliness.

Elsewhere it was examined that the Mobile phones are quite influential powerful amongst all other modern devices of communication. Using these devices learning process can be controlled by the learners themselves. Different materials can be downloaded by the teachers and students using their Mobile phones, a video can be downloaded by the teachers using mobile phones and then can be presented to the students through technology in class rooms.

Some other scholars viewed that by using Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, Mobile phones could be used for the information sharing resources. Also for Google, Google drive, Emails, and other social media can be helpful for academics as well as sharing of learning resources. Students can get corrective, timely and immediate feedback from the teachers and a lot of pertinent materials can be shared between both of them.

Another researcher says that technology based on mobile phones has the talent and potential to raise efficiency of the learners', most importantly in times where self-learning is lacking and it helps learners to learn in an autonomous way.

The ability to easily record and playback a student's voice and compare it to a native speaker's voice is a great learning tool for the language learner. Moreover, the ability to record and playback videos is another asset for learning a language. Listening to music and watching videos are very popular exercises for students as well. The ability to create and listen to podcasts is another advantage for language learning. As a result multimedia ability is the other advantage of MALT. Access to the Internet gives students the ability to search for and receive information about any topic. Online dictionaries and other information gathering tools are used widely by students in language classrooms. Using social networking websites can be a positive way for students to share information, thoughts and ideas on a variety of subjects. Some students, who may be shy in a classroom, may do much better in a social networking situation.

Digital Devices can offer immediate feedback to their peers or their instructors. Students can answer questions on a survey, a class exercise, a quiz, or a test. Specialized systems such as the module of the Mobile Audience Response System (MOARS) can automatically calculate scores and inform students and their instructors of their progress.

5. Considerations and Demerits

The following considerations and demerits need to be taken into account by colleagues and learners who are interested in utilizing mobile devices in language classes and beyond. The reality is that we don't know whether it is efficient and effective for learners to use mobile apps to learn English language by themselves. MALL is a new way for Iranian English language learners. Thus, learners' attitudes towards it are not clear. On the other hand, with the explosion of apps, learners are supplied with more choices. But every coin has two sides. Although there are a lot of apps referring to learning English and learners are easier to get these materials and resources, the reality is that the App market is like a jungle. There is too much software for them to choice and use. Obviously, there is a lack of recommendation about relevant apps and suggestions about how effectively to use them to learn English. Thus, empirical research about these problems is much needed.

All the learners don't have mobile devices. Clearly, no member of the class should be made to feel disadvantaged either in or out of class, so learning tasks need to be carefully designed so that the desired learning outcomes for learners are not constrained by lack of a smartphone or tablet. It is not envisaged that all learners in a class would be working individually with their own devices in most situations. Studying in a language class generally implies collaboration and oral communication, not individual work that could be done elsewhere. Depending on the task, learners can usefully share and work together with one device per pair or group. However, listening or viewing may sometimes require use of one device per person.

Some learners are not willing to use their personal mobile devices as part of their language learning in or out of class. Contracts vary in terms of charges for internet use and data downloading. Is Wi-Fi free and available in class? Do learners have internet access at home? It is important to ensure learners are not required to use their own contract allowance and incur costs. Wi-Fi connection: How strong is the signal in classrooms and school buildings? What happens when many learners log on to use the Wi-Fi at once? There are many activities that use features of mobile devices that do not require internet access, but collaborative

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work and sharing most likely will. If Wi-Fi is not available then it might be possible for learners to continue working on tasks outside class and at home, including places that offer free Wi-Fi.

Data storage is another challenge of the use of mobile devices in language learning environment. How much free space is there on learners' devices? Recordings, photos and video can require a considerable amount of space. Downloading an app requires storage space and while some apps work offline, many function only with internet access. Moreover the majority of mobile applications require permissions to access certain features of devices in order to function and create multimedia texts, for example the location data of photographs stored on phones. Some apps ask for permission to access contacts and share (or sell) this data. Learners and teachers need to understand what terms and conditions apply when agreeing to download and use apps for language learning. Some learners may not be willing to make, or feel comfortable about making or sharing, recordings (video or photography) featuring their own image and voice. Such practices may be culturally inappropriate or forbidden. It is vital to ensure learners are not made to feel excluded while devising learning activities and tasks that include photography or recording, and always to ensure learners seek permission from other group members before sharing and publishing in open online forums.

It is worth noting that most teachers will be confronted with a variety of models, brands and versions of operating systems on devices owned by a group of learners. This variety has implications for website functionality and display. For example, one or two learners in a group may be able to tap and post a comment or link to a video on their phones, whereas others accessing the same shared online space will not see or be able to do what their colleagues can. If the teacher displays the same website for the whole class it is usually possible to ensure that each group can contribute their work through the sharing of devices.While students can access dictionaries and other online information for learning during class time, the same use is inappropriate during a quiz. So cheating by using mobile devices is a serious offence that should be dealt with appropriately. Watching videos unrelated to the lesson, playing online games, and using social networks for connecting with classmates, but not in the target language are inappropriate uses of the device during class and may lead to class disruptions.

Some technical problems may arise during class such as network failures and individual students having problems with the hardware require the instructor to troubleshoot the issues as well as instructing individual students on how to resolve problems. Some other constrains of MALT are small screen/keypad and reading difficulty on such a screen; multimedia and graphics limitations and the cost of the Internet access on the mobile phone.

The last and not the least challenge of MALL is that many people are unaware of exactly how their devices work, or what it is possible to do on or with their phones or tablets. Some learners and teachers also don't understand how their mobile devices work. The teacher's role is not to provide IT support for all (or any) of the learners' devices. However, devoting part of a lesson to group exploration of some features and capabilities while accessing peer expertise would be a good way of ascertaining those useful to language learning and contributing to digital literacy. In order to access peer and online help learners of English should be encouraged to switch their operating systems (interface language) to English. This is a useful and practical repository of L2 that will be evident on a daily basis.

6.   Conclusion and Future Direction

Mobile phones are common gadget used by everyone nowadays. One can hardly find any house or any individual without Mobile phone. In old days mobile phones were only used for phone calls but now with the introduction of android Mobile phones every individual can be connected with the world through his/her mobile phones explores that MALL helps to connect people at two levels i.e. virtual and real world. The use of mobile devices and their multimedia capabilities can help language learners have more authentic real world learning experiences, situating learning within their cultural and linguistic schemata. In this paper, we have argued both the theoretical background of MALL, which are still a growing and underestimated field as well as showing its practical side and the examples of specific activities, tasks, interfaces and systems that are already available to the public and which can be of help to EFL teachers and students. Mobile based language learning has its own merits and demerits. There is a tendency in implementing mobile solutions, both broadly and

locally, to sometimes uncritically focus on technology merits. Among the merits for technology in language learning that are particularly relevant to mobile environments are access, authenticity, and situated learning. However, these affordances are accompanied by challenges and limitations. For example, while mobile learning allows anytime/anywhere access, the learning experience on mobile devices may be degraded by a number of factors such as limited screen size and the often distracting environments in which they are used. Therefore, if language teachers are planning to use mobile learning to foster students' language skills, it is better to see the advantages and limitations of the method. In addition, they should introduce themselves with the features and characteristics of mobile based learning. They should also verify that the language content which they are planning teach fits with the approach (mobile based learning) or not. Even, it's also important to check the nature of the students' mobile and its compatibility with the required applications.

Though many researches have been carried out towards MALL technology as a growing field of study in language learning, there are still so many works left to be done and a large amount of information to be uncovered. What can be suggested for the further research is the area of pedagogic studies providing specific evidence on how the use of mobile technology affects individual's time management when learning a new language is needed to understand if this technology can open additional learning possibilities, for example, in terms of engaged time as well as in the development of student autonomy with the help of mobile devices. To sum up, more research into developing mobile learning theory is necessary to distinguish this field from other kinds of technology-assisted learning such as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), for instance. Moreover, the methods with the help of which mobile device technology can be used to provide a more robust learning environment have to be further improved. The ways through which the constraints of CALL have been removed can help the MALL technology to grow with less effort and cost. In order to teach/learn speaking and listening skills, mobile-based activities need some further improvements due to the hardware weaknesses. Mobile assisted learning faces many challenges, but it has grown in exponentially in spite of all its limitations to provide a better environment for language learning.

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