

Chapter 4

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning: Research-Based Best Practices for Maximizing Learner Success

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines practical findings from the emerging body of research on Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). After briefly situating the conversation within a framework of how best to use technology for language instruction, the chapter opens with a review of what we know about how to use mobile technology for language learning. Then, the discussion turns to how to best apply these findings in various instructional contexts, including K–12, higher education, and workplace training. By the end of the chapter, students will have both a solid understanding of how mobile technology can facilitate second language learning as well as concrete examples of how to develop and execute a mobile language learning strategy in various educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a relatively new subfield of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and best practices for how to incorporate it into an overall language learning curriculum are just beginning to emerge. As with all mobile learning, MALL offers a convenient way for learners to access instructional materials on the go, and it also provides access to instruction for learners who lack desktop computers or laptops. Further, unlike many other instructional domains, MALL has the potential to offer learners significant real-world practice with their field of study.

At its most basic, people learn languages in order to communicate with other people—through conversations, written exchanges, and audio- and video-recordings. And the primary use of mobile phones is to talk to people and to send them written messages. Any discussion of MALL, therefore, needs to

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include both using mobile devices for specific “educational” programming as well as using the features of mobile devices themselves as a means to foster the real-world practice that we know results in language learning.

The aim of this chapter is to consider what is currently known about how MALL can influence the second language learning process through an examination of existing empirical findings, both those that investigate the use of mobile devices for instructional materials as well as those that evaluate the benefits of using the devices for genuine communicative practice. Because MALL research is relatively new, the discussion will also include areas where MALL has the potential to be effective given established best practices for second language instruction. The chapter will conclude with concrete examples of how to develop, execute, and evaluate a cohesive mobile strategy in instructional settings. Each instructional setting, from K-12 to corporate training, has unique needs, so the settings will be considered one by one in terms of how to best use MALL to maximize learning outcomes.

Overview of Language Learning

Before any discussion of how to use mobile devices to facilitate language learning, it is important to understand how second language learning works and how technology can facilitate the process. Learning a language is learning a new skill, and learners progress at different rates and improve in different areas (e.g., reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, pronunciation) depending on a host of factors, such as their starting proficiency, the amount of time they spend practicing, the quality of their language practice, their motivation, and their cognitive strengths. Further complicating matters, there are dozens of ways for learners to accomplish the same tasks in a new language. Asking someone for street directions, for example, can be accomplished through the use of brute force and hand gestures, or by politely interrupting a passerby and exchanging pleasantries about the weather.

Over the years, there have been hundreds of thousands of pages written about the best way to teach languages using a variety of frameworks and approaches, from those that focus on explicit grammar instruction to those that rely solely on implicit learning. And while theorists and practitioners continue to disagree on topics such as the importance of error correction, the role of grammar in the classroom, and the extent to which adults are able to learn implicitly, there are some general, empirically-established facts about how Second Language Acquisition (SLA) works that are useful to understanding how MALL works in the broader setting of instructed SLA.

In order to learn a language, students require access to vast quantities of input, or written and spoken examples of the language they are learning. Ideally, this input should be genuine, which means that it was originally written or spoken for a specific, real-world purpose (e.g., a news article, a voicemail, a documentary film). In addition, the input should be at the appropriate level for language learners. So beginners should learn from input such as images, maps, drawings, signs, text messages, short voice-mails, and advertisements, whereas more advanced learners should learn from recorded interviews, news articles, letters, and television shows.

Significant empirical research has established that input alone is not enough to facilitate the second language acquisition process. Students must also be pushed to produce the language themselves, either through written or spoken output (Izumi, 2003, 2003). When students go to write or speak, they often notice gaps in what they want to be able to do and what they are able to do, which drives them to look for words, phrases, and structures they need to accomplish their tasks. Ideally, this output practice is also meaningful, rather than, for example, a rote listen-and-repeat drill, or an exercise asking them to pronounce

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