

# The MALL: Where Language Learning Takes Place Anytime Anywhere

CHEN Xiaobin

School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology, P.R. China, 510640

xbchen@scut.edu.cn

**Abstract:** The use of mobile device in language learning and teaching has long been a field of immense interest among language educators and researchers, especially under the current tide of mobile fad. This paper presents the state-of-the-art mobile technologies that can facilitate foreign language learning. Examples of language learning apps on these mobile devices are reviewed, and the ways in which these mobile technologies can be combined with traditional language teaching and learning are discussed. It is concluded that in order to make effective use of mobile technologies, teachers need to develop pedagogically sound methods while acknowledging the instrumental role of mobile assisted language learning in language instruction.

**Keywords:** Mobile Assisted Language Learning, Mobile Technologies, Second Language Acquisition

## 1 Introduction

The history of mobile learning, or m-learning, is almost as long as that of cell phones. However, new devices with enhanced capabilities have dramatically increased the interest level, including among language educators (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Brown (2001), with the Stanford Learning Lab, utilized both voice and email with mobile phones to deliver vocabulary practice, quizzes, word and phrase translations in a Spanish program. SMS instruction research proved the effectiveness of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and students' preference to the new teaching method (Thornton & Houser, 2002; 2003; 2005). In a comparative study, Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) evaluated participants' performances in a series of tasks under three different circumstances: PC email, mobile phone email, and face-to-face speaking. They discovered that the face-to-face speaking group finished the tasks significantly faster than the PC email and mobile phone email groups. However, an interesting effect was that the mobile phone email users were able to communicate more effectively; they told the whole story in a narrative task with only a single text-message.

The universal availability of smart phones and other intelligent handheld gadgets, such as Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), iPads, Android tablets, among the *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) brings language education researchers and practitioners more benefits than challenges. Language teaching in the traditional chalk-and-blackboard setting of a classroom has become less appealing to the students grown up under the digital era. Language teachers who are capable of utilizing modern technologies in and outside their classrooms not only benefit from students' enhanced performance, but are also more welcomed. With the advancement of mobile technology, language learning anytime and anywhere has been made feasible. MALL has become a trend language educators cannot ignore.

The present paper will first present the state-of-the-art mobile technologies that can facilitate

foreign language learning. Then examples of language learning apps on these mobile devices will be reviewed, then the ways in which these mobile technologies can be combined with traditional language teaching and learning will also be discussed.

## **2 Mobile Devices**

Long before the emergence of smart phones and other modern mobile devices such as PDAs and iPad tablets, students had been using portable audio-video players, electronic dictionaries, and E-book readers for language learning (Gdowin-Jones, 2011). The portability of these devices enabled students to receive language input and seek assistance without being bound to the language classroom with an instructor. Traditional cell phones' audio communication and SMS functions were also utilized to provide students with not only portability, but also immediacy in response, which is deemed crucial to language learning. However, after a survey of projects using traditional mobile phones for vocabulary practice, quiz delivery, live tutoring, and email lesson content delivery, Chinnery (2006) summarized limitations with these devices, including low-resolution screens, poor quality audio, text entry difficulties, small storage and memory, and slow or even no Internet connection. Small and low-resolution screens are problematic in displaying both images or videos and longer texts. Text entry with T9 keyboards is much slower than using the full QWERTY keyboards found on desktop computers. Small memory inhibits the storage and delivery of multimedia contents which require larger storage spaces.

The limitations of traditional mobile devices described above were overcome by the introduction of Apple iPhone and other smart phones and handheld tablets. In 2007 Apple introduced its first iPhone with functionalities that other competitors swarmed forward to provide in their own product lines. Nowadays, smart phones equipped with high resolution and clarity 4-inch screens (or even larger), powerful processors which are capable of smooth display of HD video while multitasking on web-browsing and online chatting is not uncommon among students of the college level. Added on to the must-have functionalities of traditional mobile phones in audio and SMS communications, smart phones also feature interactive touch screens, audio/video/image capture and editing, fast Wi-Fi/3G Internet connectivity with full-fledged Web browsing and social networking, as well as GPS and accelerometers. The smartness of these phones lies in their capabilities to install and run third-party applications for various purposes, including educational ones.

Another mobile device that can't be ignored for discussion of MALL is the touch screen tablets, which can be considered as touch screen laptops without keyboards or ultra-large smart PDAs. Apple's innovative iPad series are the starters of this tablet tide. Their super-large HD touch screens (compared to smart phones, tablets usually feature 7- to 10-inch touch screens) are more spacious for displaying E-book contents, images, and videos. Thinner design allows for higher portability which enables learning to take place anytime and anywhere the students go. Except for making telephone calls, tablets and smart phones share almost all the other functionalities. They even share the same operating systems

(iOS for Apple products, Android for most other popular products) which make it possible for learning apps to be shared among devices.

It is self-evident that the availability of such powerful handheld devices anytime, anyplace provides tremendous opportunities for educational use (Godwin-Jones, 2011). However, their utilization in mobile assisted language learning also needs to be supported by pedagogically-sound applications that run on them. With the popularization of smart phones and tablets, the paucity of applications in m-learning in general and in MALL in particular is proliferating. The following section will review some apps designed specifically for language learning and other general purpose apps that can be adopted for language instruction if carefully planned.

### **3 Language Learning Apps**

The most popular mobile platforms on the market are Apple's iOS and Google's Android systems, both of which have taken up most of the market share in the past few years. Because of their popularity, most applications designed for mobile devices offer both iOS and Android versions. MALL apps which feature specific language skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, and phrasal verbs and so on, or full-length language lessons abound. Claire Siskin (2009) maintained a nice list of apps for language learning, in which MALL applications were classified into built-in apps, instructional apps, social networking apps, repurposed apps, and exercise generation apps. A Google search of the term "apps for language learning" yields various list of the "coolest" or "best" language learning apps for iPhone/iPad or Android devices. The iTunes App Store and Android Market are places where MALL apps can be found and downloaded or bought. Searching for "language learning" in them both yields thousands of apps ready to use. However, not all of them are of high quality or suitable for every learner.

Language learning apps that are most commonly found on mobile devices are vocabulary development tools (e.g. byki, 24/7 Tutor, AccelaStudy, the MindSnacks series, etc.). These tools resemble PC-based flashcard programs, but offer more functionalities by creatively utilizing mobile devices' special features. One example of such tools is an app for learning the stroke order for writing Chinese characters called "Chinese Chinese", which allows user to simulate writing Chinese characters by following the animated strokes with a finger on the screen. The World Lens application features instantly translation of printed words from one language to another with the built-in video camera of the mobile device, in real time. This saves the user the efforts to type in the words. Learning through gaming appeals to learners of a foreign language, especially to younger learners. The MindSnack Italian is one of such apps, featuring six exciting games designed to build essential vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and conversation skills. The Erasmos Inc. has developed a series of vocabulary acquisition apps on the iOS platform, including apps for learning language specifics, such as French gender, Russian alphabet, Spanish numbers, etc. These innovative ways of vocabulary learning will greatly enhance learner performance and improve the effectiveness of language learning.

Full-length foreign language instruction apps feature an integrated environment for learning all the

four skills a proficient speaker must possess. KiwiTech's comprehensive hello-hello application, available in several languages, is one of the most popular comprehensive language learning apps. It features 3 levels with 30 conversational lessons based on real-life situations. Dialogues are presented with video and audio, and it allows learners to practice speaking on a sentence-by-sentence basis. The 24/7 Tutor is a similar system for learning basic French, Spanish, and German. Included in the system are native speaker audio for all words, entertaining puzzle games, write in quizzes to test language recall, manual and automatic flash cards, multiple choice quizzes, etc, all geared to enhance learning outcomes.

General purpose apps, if used appropriately, can also be used as mobile language learning tools, especially for more advanced learners. Television/radio networks and news agencies are good sources of language input. They provide opportunities for foreign language learners to read and listen extensively in the target language. Many of these organizations have gone mobile in order to reach more audience. Univision, a Spanish-language television network in the US, provides an app for mobile users to news, entertainment and sports coverage anytime anywhere. Users of the app can follow their favorite stories and get local updates with personalized settings, which enable them to be engaged in issues that matter to them the most. AP Mobile is another app of this kind. It offers national and international coverage with videos and photos and easy ways to share what the user is reading. City Maps and Walks is an app that guides city tour lovers to walk all the major city attractions with turn-by-turn walking directions, by utilizing mobile devices' GPS functionality. Audio narration and photos of the places of interests help users appreciate local attractions. Learners and language teachers can use it in the real context and learn about the culture and history of a city by making real tours. Learning about the culture of the target language community is enhancive to language learning since language and culture are inseparable. World Customs and Cultures is an app that collected customs, cultural information, and facts on over 165 different countries. Each country is broken down into separate cultural fact groups: greetings, communication style, personal space and touching, eye contact, views of time, gender issues, gestures, taboos, and law and order. It can even show the culture facts of a region or country by automatically detecting where the user is in.

Another kind of language learning apps for mobile devices is reference tools like dictionaries and translation tools. Multi-language translation and dictionary tools such as Mobile Glot Translation Dictionary and Google Translate are popular among mobile users. These apps are no difference from traditional computer- or internet-based programs. However, innovative creations making use of mobile functionalities are not uncommon. An example is the Translator with Voice app which is capable of recognizing voice input of sentences and words and reading out translated sentences in the target language. It accepts input and output of dozens of different languages. From an educational perspective, it is not only handy as a translation tool, but can also function as a test of the user's foreign language pronunciation and intonation, as it usually accepts only the standard dialect of a language.

## **4 Conclusion**

The benefits of mobile assisted language learning are easy to see. As Chinnery (2006) summarized, mobile devices, including mobile phones, PDAs and tablets, are readily available to college level students because of their less expensive cost than standard equipment such as PCs. Their portability enables them to be used outside of the classroom as well as in it, which helps expanding the learning environment. Besides, they can be easily connected to the Internet on which interaction between learner and learner or learners and native speakers are made possible with social networking applications. This will help remedy the situation in which authentic context for language use is lacking.

In spite of the advantages posed by MALL, language educator and researchers also meet a lot of challenges. Although applications specifically designed for mobile devices abound, not all of them are of high quality. For the most part, users of these apps can use them to solve certain problems they face in the process of learning a foreign language, but this requires the learners' having a clear mind of what their problems are. Learners, especially beginners, are lack of such consciousness. Furthermore, not every mobile user can take full advantage of the mobility, peer connectivity, or advanced communication features of mobile devices (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2007). The problem is less one of hardware/software shortcomings and more in developers' conceptualization of how language learning could be enhanced in new, innovative ways with the assistance of mobile devices (Godwin-Jones, 2011).

As language teachers, adopting mobile teaching methodologies is not simply about following the latest trend of revolutionary technologies. Technology-driven pedagogy (Salaberry, 2001) is not a once-for-all solution to all language teaching and learning problems. Making effective use of mobile technologies with pedagogically sound methods while acknowledging the instrumental role of MALL in language instruction should be a more favorable attitude.

## References

- [1]. Brown, E. (Ed.) (2001, January 8). Mobile learning explorations at the Stanford Learning Lab. *Speaking of Computers*, 55. Stanford, CA: Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Retrieved from <http://sll.stanford.edu/projects/tomprof/newtomprof/postings/289.html>
- [2]. Chinnery, G.M. (2006). Emerging technologies: Going to the MALL: Mobile assisted language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 10(1), 9-16. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/vol10num1/pdf/emerging.pdf>
- [3]. Godwin-Jones, R. (2011). Emerging technologies: Mobile apps for language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 15(2), 2-11. Retrieved from <http://llt.msu.edu/issues/june2011/emerging.pdf>
- [4]. Kiernan, P.J., & Aizawa, K. (2004). Cell phones in task based learning: Are cell phones useful language learning tools? *ReCALL*, 16(1), 71-84.
- [5]. Kukulska-Hulme, A., & Shield, L. (2007). An overview of mobile assisted language learning: Can mobile devices support collaborative practice in speaking and listening? Paper presented at

EuroCALL 2007, Conference Virtual Strand, September, 2007. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.84.1398&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

- [6]. Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. In *On the Horizon*, 9(5), MCB University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing>
- [7]. Salaberry, M.R. (2001). The use of technology for second language learning and teaching: A retrospective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(i), 39-56.
- [8]. Siskin, C. (2009). Language Learning Applications for Smartphones, or Small Can Be Beautiful. Webpage. Retrieved from <http://www.edvista.com/claire/pres/smartphones/>
- [9]. Thornton, p., & Houser, C. (2002). M-learning in transit. In P. Lewis (Ed.), *The changing face of CALL* (pp.229-243). Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- [10]. Thornton, p., & Houser, C. (2003). Using mobile web and video phones in English language teaching: Projects with Japanese college students. In B. Morrison, C. Green, & G. Motteram (Eds.), *Directions in CALL: Experience, experiments & evaluation* (pp. 207-224). Hong Kong: English Language Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
- [11]. Thornton, p., & Houser, C. (2005). Using mobile phones in English Education in Japan. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 21, 217-228.