

Chapter 54

Investigating Mobile Assisted English Foreign Language Learning and Teaching in China: Issues, Attitudes and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and students in China spontaneously use apps for smartphone and tablets to support their informal language learning. It also seeks to determine EFL teachers' perspectives on informal and formal Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). A total of 240 smartphone and/or tablet users (186 students and 54 EFL teachers) from four colleges in Guangdong China participated in the survey. Twenty-eight teachers selected from the survey participants were interviewed afterwards. Analysis of the survey data showed that all participants were using apps to learn foreign languages informally. Survey data analysis also revealed that the most frequently used apps were based on form-focused behaviorist activities rather than learner-centered constructivist activities. A comparison of usage between EFL teachers and students revealed no significant difference in their choice of apps, yet students expected guidance from EFL teachers in using apps and resources to facilitate language learning. Finally, while the survey data indicated EFL teachers had positive attitudes towards informal MALL, the interviews revealed that many of them held negative sentiments toward MALL in the classroom. We interpret this difference in attitudes as a reflection of the teachers' concerns about learners' self-control and autonomous learning skills, as well as concerns about required teachers' knowledge and perceived changes to teachers' roles. We conclude by discussing the implications of MALL for language teacher education and professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile learning (m-learning) can be briefly described as e-learning that uses mobile devices and wireless transmission (Keegan, 2002). Compared to classroom-based computer learning, mobile learning can extend interaction beyond the classroom and thus provide chances for individualized, contextualized, and informal learning (Cheon, Lee, Crooks, & Song, 2012). One of the major subject areas of education that could potentially benefit from learning strategies using mobile technology is second/foreign language learning and teaching. *Mobile Assisted Language Learning* (MALL) is language learning that is assisted or enhanced through the use of a handheld mobile device (Chinnery, 2006). Proponents claim that it is commonplace to integrate mobile technology in language classrooms in many secondary and higher education institutions (Abdous, Camarena & Facer, 2009). In addition, mobile technology, combined with dramatic increases in online resources and abundant educational apps, provide new opportunities for self-directed learning outside of classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2011b).

However, few studies have investigated how smartphone and tablets that boast enhanced capabilities and numerous applications (apps) can facilitate language learning and teaching. Even fewer studies have looked into whether and how language teachers and students in college would spontaneously use such devices and apps to support their language learning out of classroom. Another area of concern is teachers' perception and attitude towards MALL. Previous literature on language teachers' perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of mobile devices for learning and teaching is partial and scarce (Oz, 2015), while studies on how smartphone or tablets with abundant apps can support language learning are even more difficult to find.

Although there is a paucity of research, MALL studies have often been undertaken in some developed areas such as in USA, UK, Taiwan, and Japan (Burston, 2014), and much fewer studies were conducted in China. However, China has witnessed sharp increases in smartphone and tablet users in recent years. The smartphone user penetration rate among mobile phone users in China are rising from 43 percent in 2013 to 48 percent in 2014, with over half of all smartphone users aged between 18 and 34 years old ("Share of mobile," n.d.). China is also forecasted to be the world leader in terms of tablet users in 2015 ("Tablet Users," 2015). Given the scarcity of MALL studies in China, especially as far as new mobile devices such as the iPhone and iPad are concerned, plus the fast increase of smartphone and tablet users in China, the purpose of this study is to identify whether and how language teachers and students at the university level in China are using such devices in informal language learning. If they do, what is their evaluation on facilitating informal MALL using smartphones or tablets? Furthermore, this study seeks to determine how language teachers in China perceive language classrooms facilitated by mobile devices with smartphone features; what, then, are their concerns for MALL to be implemented in classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though the concept of MALL has existed for nearly two decades (dating back to 1994), MALL is considered by some to be still "on the fringes" (Burston, 2014, p. 103). Investigating further, our review of early research on MALL (pre-smartphone) revealed three main areas of concern (technical, pedagogical, and attitudinal) when it came to adopting MALL approaches and practices. Our review also suggests the advent of smartphone technology alleviates these earlier concerns.

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