

## Chapter 12

# Researching Mobile-Assisted English Language Learning Among Adult Distance Learners in China: Emerging Practices and Learner Perception of Teacher Role

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Guided by the conceptual framework for next generation designs for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in informal setting, our study investigates how mobile devices impact the learning practices and habits amongst adult distant learners of English at a higher education institution in China. Data sources include quantitative data of 148 completed responses to an online survey and qualitative data from follow-up email interviews. The study demonstrates that students' main motivation for engaging in mobile assisted English learning is to fill in the gaps in their daily schedule in order to maximize available time, and the majority use mobile devices to support formal course learning. The skills and knowledge areas practiced with mobile devices are listening, followed by speaking and pronunciation, vocabulary, reading, and translation. Our study also reveals that teachers play a very limited role as perceived by students, while students expect more support from teachers for their out-of-class hour mobile assisted language learning. The research findings bear significant pedagogical implications in terms of integrating MALL into language learning curriculum, learner support and the need for continuous teacher training.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing affordability, accessibility and sophistication of mobile communication technology has infiltrated the education market (Hao, Dennien, & Li, 2017). The ubiquitous nature of mobile technology enables learners to have access to resources ‘appropriate to their immediate situation’ (Read, Bárcena, & Kukulska-Hulme, 2016), which offers enormous opportunities to support learning and teaching both inside and outside the classroom (Martin & Ertzberger, 2013).

In the field of second language learning (L2), mobile devices have truly become language learners’ personal digital assistants (PDAs) (Godwin-Jones, 2011). The wide range of language learning mobile applications encourages learners to be more learner-centred (Burston, 2014). As a result, the practices and behaviours of language learners are changing (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012a; Arvanitis, Krystalli, & Panagiotidis, 2016). Mobile learning is especially important in a distance language learning context when students constantly struggle with the time as they work whilst studying (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007); and when there is limited interaction between teachers and students and amongst peers (Kan, Owen, & Bax, 2018). Language learning outside class hours, assisted by mobile devices, is essential to the development of language competence (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012a). Previous studies have revealed that L2 adult distance learners are becoming more and more self-directed learners as the technology enables them to be better organized and spend more time learning the language than before (Demouy, Jones, Kan, Kukulska-Hulme, & Eardley, 2016; Kukulska-Hulme & De Los Arcos, 2011).

With the increasing ownership of mobile devices among the world’s largest English language learning population and the Ministry of Education in China actively encouraging the use of technology in promoting instructional efficiency in college English language education (cf. China Ministry of Education, 2016), it is important to examine how learners in China use mobile devices to support their English language learning, and what and how mobile learning resources are used so that mobile language learning can be effectively embedded into the teaching. A better understanding of it is particularly important in distance education when the boundaries between formal classroom learning and informal outside class learning are blurred (Demouy et al., 2016). Our study intends to find out if the reported emerging practices among Western distance learners reported in Demouy et al.’s study (2016) apply to a different cultural context, i.e. adult distant learners at the university level in China. If there are differences, we will explore the reasons behind them. Our study also aims to extend Demouy et al.’s study in the sense that we look beyond emerging practices to include two new dimensions: i) to link the skills practiced or knowledge areas obtained with their favourite apps/resources; ii) and to explore learner perceptions of the tutor’s role.

Our study is guided by the conceptual framework with six aspects of analysis proposed by Kukulska-Hulme (2012a) for next generation designs for mobile-assisted language learning to explore the interaction between time, space and characteristics of learning activities. Underpinned by Kukulska-Hulme’s conceptual framework (see 3.2 for further details), our study partially replicates Demouy al.’s study (2016) in terms of using some of the questions in their survey in order to compare distance learners in the UK with those in China.

In the section that follows, we will briefly review relevant literature that informs the critical analysis of our data so as to answer the research questions (see 3.1). It will be followed by the research questions and methodology section where we describe our instruments and methods of analysis. We will then present the results with analysis, and finally we discuss some key issues with potential implications for MALL use for tertiary English language teaching practices in China and suggestions for future research.

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