European Journal of English Language Teaching
ISSN: 2501-7136
ISSN-L: 2501-7136
Available on-line at: www.oapub.org/edu

DOI: 10.46827/ejel.v6i5.3884 Volume 6 | Issue 5 | 2021

MESSAGES BEHIND MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract:
This paper offers a brief commentary on the ways to transform English as a foreign language students from autonomous language learners to proficient language users through mobile-assisted language learning by deducing on empirical insights from the articles in this perspective.

Keywords: autonomous learners, mobile-assisted language learning, scaffolding, self-directed learning

1. Introduction

The significant increase in the use of mobile technology today, such as smartphones and tablets, has resulted in its widespread use for educational purposes (Becker & Nguyen, 2017; García Botero, Questier, & Zhu, 2019) and specifically for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), which, with its capability of facilitating learning anytime and anywhere (Lai & Zheng, 2017), has heralded a new era in language education (Godwin-Jones, 2017). Nowadays, the concept of mobile learning has become popular, and mobile learning has changed learners' learning behaviors; for example, learners might be involved in interactions with specific target language communities with shared interests, passions, professional, or personal aspirations (Godwin-Jones, 2019a). This aspect suggests that learners have more opportunities to engage in language learning, and the process can be assisted in different ways such as through social media and mobile devices. MALL also offers the possibility of the student integrating language learning into social or professional context (Godwin-Jones, 2017). Isamiddinovna (2019) added that mobile learning provides learners with unlimited access to various educational resources. With the assistance of these mobile devices, language acquisition becomes something that learners can integrate directly into their lives and bridge the gap between school and life (Godwin-Jones, 2017). The nature of the learning process through mobile

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devices is continuous, intensive, and technological. Embedded activities through MALL hold the potential to make learning language more meaningful and memorable (Burston, 2015). As MALL can expand learning context and empower learners to see language learning as integral to real-world experiences (Godwin-Jones, 2019), it is fully in line with the principles of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1990).

Isamiddinovna (2019) and Godwin-Jones (2017) summarized several significant advantages associated with MALL, including its high accessibility, which enables continuous communication and interaction between learners and tutors and between learners and other learners; its support of more situated and contextual learning; its provision of opportunities for self-assessment; and its low-cost and convenience for the learner. Furthermore, as an advantage of the digital age, MALL encourages students to use multimedia in their education while increasing their confidence and class participation (Rezaei & Pasaranghader, 2018). Thus, MALL offers several options for both learners and teachers to enrich their learning and teaching experiences. As highlighted above, MALL has changed the way language is acquired. In this paper, we would like to elaborate how MALL can leverage learners' role from autonomous language learners to proficient language users.

2. Self-directed Learning and Autonomous Learners in MALL

MALL has made students more engaged in multiple forms of informal learning including incidental, such as gameplay; instrumental, such as language learning app; or accidental, such as YouTube videos. These aspects further result in discovery learning and deeper learning processing (Godwin-Jones, 2017). Some previous studies argued that through discovery learning, MALL can leverage language learning in diverse ways (Leis et al., 2015; Moreno & Vemeulen, 2015). For example, Leis et al. (2015) had students make videos using the target language that assists them in their language fluency and pragmatic competence. Moreno and Vemeulen (2015) applied an innovative approach to working with mobile videos, having learners create audio descriptions of scenes that improve their speech fluency and pronunciation accuracy. Hwang et al. (2016) developed a mobile game-based English learning system and compared its use with paper-and-pen methods. Their findings indicated that the students in the experimental group made considerable gains in their oral skills than those in the control group by engaging in a situational learning environment where they could acquire and practice pronunciation and new vocabulary in their daily lives. Through the authentic context of the mobile system, students were able to create and speak meaningful sentences with accuracy and confidence. Sun et al. (2017) integrated mobile social-networking sites into their English classes to explore the effects on the speaking skills of English as a foreign language students and found that their speaking fluency improved more through authentic communications through their mobile devices than through classroom instructions. Based on the above examples, Sun et al. (2017) concluded that MALL improves students' English-speaking abilities, expand their vocabulary, and increase their speaking fluency. As MALL allows students to practice their English speaking in a meaningful, low-

stressed, and situated context, it is an effective educational tool for enhancing students' speaking skills and supporting their self-directed learning (Grimshaw & Cardoso, 2018). Self-directed learning can develop learners' autonomy in language acquisition (Merzifonluoglu & Gonulal, 2018), which is considered a necessary element for optimum output in communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Godwin-Jones, 2019a; Klimova, 2019). Godwin-Jones (2019b) added that through the use of MALL, autonomous learners have made significant progress in attaining the accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and accuracy in the target language because MALL provides learners the opportunity to practice speaking and offers frequent exposure to the target language (Klimova, 2019). Thus, the use of MALL provides access to a wide range of speaking opportunities, which supports students' learning autonomy. However, other studies reveal a few downsides of MALL due to the latitude MALL grants to students. Some students mentioned that although MALL offers them a full control of learning pace, they find that the level of engagement may be broadly superficial or casual rather than deep. This superficiality may reflect the limitations of learning with mobile technologies such as the difficulty of working at length with a small screen and keyboard to do tasks more easily accomplished on larger devices (Rosell-Anguilar, 2017). Further, the existing literature revealed that MALL gives little attention to learning strategies, lacks curricular integration (Bozdoğan, 2015), and offers minimal pedagogical support (Rosell-Anguilar, 2017). Therefore, to make mobile learning sustain deep levels of engagement with language learning while exploiting its features of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy is an area worth further exploring. Teachers are highly recommended to rethink the use of MALL by engaging in actual learning with mobile devices for effective changes.

3. Teacher's Role and Learners' Expectation in MALL

Godwin-Jones (2019a) highlighted that learners' progress in autonomous learning due to the available resources and opportunities at their fingertips does not reduce the importance of teachers' scaffolding. As learners pursue their potential development level by crossing the zone of proximal development (ZDP), this scaffolding can assist them in mastering, constructing, and internalizing the knowledge and skills they have learned so that they can reach higher levels of cognitive activity, such as applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Chen et al., 2017). With this in mind, Chen et al. (2017) suggested the following steps for scaffolding the learning process:

1) Teachers construct a scaffold based on the ZDP and the learning content,
2) Teachers guide students toward a certain learning situation,
3) Students explore the learning content independently,
4) Students work in groups after their independent exploration,
5) Teachers evaluate students' learning outcomes.

Godwin-Jones (2019b) emphasized that teachers should provide an in-depth orientation in the use of MALL followed by presentation of tasks in an interesting manner with clear learning objectives so that learners can be more engaged in language learning. These tasks can be completed individually and collectively, combined with a reward

system to increase the learners' motivation. Additionally, teachers should obtain feedback from the students and regularly evaluate their performance to ensure no student is left behind. Finally, when students are engaged in MALL, the teacher should act as an observer–facilitator instead of dominating the learning process. Teachers are encouraged to guide and coach students in the process of MALL and lead them to self-correct their mistakes and frequently self-evaluate their learning outcomes.

As MALL completely depends on technology and sometimes technology fails, both teachers and students must be vigilant in ensuring good condition or better functionality of their personal devices, such as thoroughly checking these devices before use in and outside of class. The major pedagogical challenge when implementing MALL is the risk of distraction. For example, students may multitask on their devices by switching between personal and educational uses, thereby damaging them. Having students work in pairs or groups and establishing competition among teams may keep learners' focus on the learning tasks (Michelson, 2017). Finally, as MALL lacks any kind of feedback function, the feedback provided by the teacher becomes instrumental in aiding learners' ability to correct their mistakes, as the need arises, in the English-speaking classes (Ghorbani & Ebadi, 2020).

The existing literature indicated that the majority of the learners agree that MALL encourages them to seek help to correct their mistakes, as they become more autonomous in their learning, and they also rely on the teacher's expertise, guidance, and instruction and expect the teacher to set their learning goals for further evaluation (Godwin-Jones, 2019a). This aspect implies that although learners develop their autonomous learning style, they are still reliant on the teacher's assistance, and teachers cannot be replaced by MALL (García Botero et al., 2019). Teachers play an important role in encouraging learners to become autonomous, and the development of autonomy requires organized practice (Godwin-Jones, 2019a). Moreover, the interactions students establish with the teacher also implicitly build their communication skills. Communication skills, the primary purpose while learning any target language, can only be developed through speaking. Thus, MALL, in combination with the scaffolding and other assistance provided by teachers, can facilitate the language learning process (Chen et al., 2017) by providing meaningful communication contexts and ample opportunities for practice.

4. From Autonomous Language Learners to Proficient Language Users

Rosell-Aguilar (2017) suggested that learners should expand the use of mobile devices for language learning even outside their classroom to build the connection with their target language. This aspect can involve searching for diverse apps that are effective to support different language skills. For example, podcasts can be a great tool to enhance listening comprehension and may provide useful resources for speaking practice. Learners are encouraged to make the best use of mobile devices for life-long language learning and further develop critical digital literacy. To achieve this, an inherent interest in the technology and a strong motivation for language learning are instrumental in MALL. Chen et al. (2017) indicated that learners' interest and motivation reflect their

personal control and autonomy in the learning process and eventually render high-quality engagement in learning. If mobile technologies can be pedagogically exploited to facilitate deeper levels of student learning and engagement in and outside classroom, MALL can assist learners in upgrading their level from autonomous language learners to proficient language users.

Godwin-Jones (2019a) stated that language teachers who facilitate out-of-school learning play a significant role in learners' life-long connection with the target language. To make language learners to become proficient L2 users with the required skills and motivation, a need to build personal connections in the context of the target language is required. This aspect will involve interactions with the target language communities, engagement with the opportunities of using the target language, and diverse real-life applications using the target language. By doing so, learners involve their own identities and interests when they learn the target language and further promote a sense of continuity between what they learn and do in the classroom and who they are and what they are fond of doing in their lives outside the classroom to build a life-long learning through real-life connection (Godwin-Jones, 2019a). It is essential that the in-class activities when using mobile devices should involve more hands-on experiences so that learners can find the connection to their lives using the target language (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Thus, language acquisition requires learners to directly integrate the learning process in their lives with the assistance of smartphones to link the gap between school and life (Godwin-Jones, 2017) and further create the learning environment of the target language for better language exposure.

5. Conclusion

Technology is a double-edged sword. The language learning process can be facilitated with ease only by putting it to good use. The benefits and challenges of MALL have been revealed in the existing literature. As mentioned above, within MALL, special attention should be given to the real-life connection wherein the learners can consider the use of mobile devices in language learning. Although MALL profits greatly in language learning, it does suffer from some drawbacks. Striking a balance between these profits and drawbacks and connecting the target language real-life application should be the ultimate goal when involving MALL. Thus, any innovative teaching tool with cutting-edge technology is recommended to not only aim at developing autonomous language learners but also transforming to them proficient language users.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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