

# *Smartphones and CLT: Threat or opportunity?*

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## **Abstract**

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is one of the fastest growing ELT sectors. To date, the teaching methods of MALL appear overly influenced by the desires of businesses, large institutions and technicians to produce easily measurable outcomes, rather than foundations built on upon pedagogical research that emphasises the importance of developing the communicative competence of learners. Findings from initial studies on MALL indicate not only the feasibility of using mobile devices for communicative purposes within classroom teaching, but also the opportunities they provide to implement a communicative approach more successfully than previously possible. Outworkings of this potential need to be established while the development of MALL remains at the “work in progress” stage.

**Keywords:** MALL, CLT, Classroom teaching, Teaching pedagogy

## **1. Introduction: The emergence of MALL**

Technology in language learning began with the use of desktop computers, but, buoyed by the added functionality of mobile devices through the ‘smartphone’ era, has now grown to incorporate mobile assisted language learning (MALL), which has been defined by Viberg & Gronlund (2012) as encompassing ‘any technology that can be used when walking around’ (p.9). As functionality has progressed, so has the attempted usage for language instruction purposes; originally with the use of text messages for teacher – student communication, then moving on to dedicated mobile applications, and up to the present day where a vast array of uses are possible, from producing videos to incidental learning through mobile media (Trinder, 2017). Suggestions have been made that this new functionality may lead to opportunities not merely to replicate existing teaching methods through technology, but to devise new pathways to teach in desirable ways not possible before. The potential for use within the classroom has been aided by the fact that enough students generally possess devices within classrooms for this to take place; a phenomenon dubbed “Bring Your Own Device” or BYOD (Burston, 2017).

A focus on MALL within research remains far short of the quantity of studies on other technology for language instruction (Burston, op.cit.). Even so, the sense that mobile technology needs integrating into planned learning activities is growing and will not wait for consensus from research on pedagogic methodology. As Hockly (2013) notes: ‘The future is increasingly mobile, and it behoves us to reflect this in our teaching practice’ (p.84). The question remains though; how best is this to be achieved?

## **2. ELT teaching methodology**

Most teacher training courses nowadays promote a teaching style which has the development of communicative competence as its main objective. Ellis (2001) sets out the evolution of the communicative approach; traditionally, language teaching emphasised mastery of the correct linguistic form, a notion which began to be challenged in the 1960s as it was noticed that mere knowledge of language did not necessarily lead to real-life usage. A model generally named “Communicative Language Teaching” (CLT) developed after this, promoting the teaching of language that produced the ability to communicate effectively through the development of language skills and functions; this then extended to include autonomy and personal relevance. Consequently, language input which was seen as meaningful and authentic was granted more prominence in the classroom, along with opportunities to produce comprehensible output.

However, this “communicative approach” led to new questions. Should an upfront focus on grammar be retained or should grammar be incidentally covered in response to the students’ input/output? A number of studies found problems with implementing approaches in certain contexts: monolingual groupings lacked communicative need in the target language, exam requirements pressurised teachers to focus on form, teacher role shifts from director to communicative facilitator were not received well in some cultures where the teacher was expected to have ultimate classroom authority, and large class sizes saw difficulties in making sessions personal, contextually relevant or student-led (Walsh & Wyatt, 2014).

These issues have resulted in objections to attempts to further this one teaching method as a global template for all to follow, with writers of new teaching textbooks such as Smith & Conti (2016) stating there is no longer an agreed prognosis for what would be best in all classrooms. Many now speak of teaching methodology entering into a “post-methods” era, where teachers should choose their approach off-the-shelf from a range of possible approaches. However, none of the objections to CLT question its fundamental principles of

relevance, authenticity, being engaging, being student-centred and the need for both input and output. Rather, objections all emphasise situations where it appears difficult to implement, and most agree that whatever method a teacher follows, these five principles still should be aspired to. It follows, then, that if new methods became available that better facilitated these principles within the particular contextual situation of any classroom, they would be welcomed by the teacher, and therefore if MALL has anything to offer in creating new communicative opportunities in the classroom, this should be welcomed too.

### **3. MALL as a mass production vehicle rather than a teaching tool?**

However, it is possible that the teaching community will not be given a chance to enter the conversation surrounding MALL if it does not do so soon, because non-teachers are rapidly shaping the future of MALL already. Mobile software technicians have driven forward the explosion of “apps” throughout societies and this is no different in the language learning app industry. This has gone hand in hand with experimentation to push the boundaries of what technology can achieve; for instance, more possibilities for automation are being tried and tested, with highly popular apps such as Duolingo (which claims to have more than 200 million active users worldwide) now offering “adaptive learning”, in that its technology learns from a student’s own mistakes and adapts future tasks to focus upon correcting those mistakes. As well as technicians, businesses and large education providers are also pushing MALL forward quickly. Even within the past few years, there has been a huge take-up worldwide of online learning opportunities through online courses, virtual worlds and MOOCs and others. In some areas, governments and private institutions are already authorising the mass deployment of mobile devices for the express purpose of language instruction, such as in parts of the Gulf region (Eppard, Nasser & Reddy 2016). Realising that the portability of mobile devices enables learners to carry materials around with them on their phones, not to mention the fact that virtual materials may be more cost effective to produce than print ones, publishers are increasingly offering large portions of their materials online rather than in print (Kolbuszewska, 2015). The popularity of blended learning where students combine classroom and independent learning continues to trend, probably due again to financial reasons for both the provider and the learner; although blended learning rose to prominence in the PC dominated era, MALL now allows a more seamless link-up between the two environments.

With large, financially driven corporations ever more invested, the risk that the teaching community will be left behind in the process of shaping MALL is clear to see. The

present danger is that these groups, primarily interested in data-driven education that gives quantifiable, measurable returns for money invested (Kolbuszewska, op. cit.), will create a new learning world through MALL that is devoid of the input from expertise on how languages should be learned best, meaning that, crucially, learners will miss out. The approach of these providers to MALL appears to resemble a “build it and they will come” attitude with far more attention to cost-savings than content (Hockly, 2015), being more about the technology than educational expertise (Toffoli & Sockett, 2015) and predominantly reflecting a vocabulary and grammar learning approach based upon on traditional behaviourist and structuralist teaching approaches (Burston, op. cit.), which has been criticised so extensively by the language teaching community for many decades.

Possible implications are concerning. A move from face-to-face to virtual learning will likely result in fewer classes. In addition, MALL in its present form may result in a move away from a classroom-based communicative approach facilitated by a trained teacher towards a “do-it-yourself” mentality to language teaching, where a teacher incorporates mobile learning in any way simply because “she has to”. One naturally asks, therefore, where this leaves the language classroom, and where this leaves the role of an expert teacher who is primed with concepts of how learning *should* happen. Moreover, considering the rebirth of traditional form-focused instruction through MALL, where does this leave the principles of a communicative approach?

The answer to these questions must be informed, as ever, not just by what the teacher believes, but also by what our students need. In the rush to claim ownership of the MALL industry, attention to learners themselves appears limited to studies which try to prove that a particular app has some effect in raising a user’s knowledge of their target language. Little attention has been given in research to their opinions or how they choose to use mobile devices for language learning (Trinder, op. cit.). However, ultimately it is the learners who drive the education industry, especially the adult one. The next section summarises the scarce information on how learners are responding to MALL, and evaluates what this tells us about their needs.

#### **4. Student responses to MALL**

For the most part, students report positive reactions to the implementation of MALL. In particular, students appear enthusiastic about the progression it represents from computer based activities in many ways, such as its ability to make learning portable and usable both in and out of the classroom. Taking the classroom context first, a small number concerns have

been raised, such as a lack of clarity in how useful MALL was perceived to be, particularly when doing in-class exercises through apps, or when attempting tasks that could be considered impractical such as extended writing. However, most studies have cited positive impacts on academic skills, electronic literacy and oral skills through tasks administered with the assistance of a mobile device. Ardi (2017) is one of several studies finding interaction, communication and participation to be improved through its use. Furthermore, Viberg & Gronlund (op. cit.) as well many other studies clearly show that students find learning through MALL to be fun and motivating, which is of interest since motivation and better performance are often thought to collocate.

Much more attention has been given to MALL that takes place outside the classroom, with some interesting and perhaps unexpected results. Though limitations of MALL are acknowledged in literature such as the restriction of small screens, research has emphasised how mobile devices enable the boundaries that time, place and medium have traditionally been imposed on language learning opportunities to be stretched and broken through their portability (Sharples, 2007); no doubt this is the opportunity that is being exploited by app producers backed by businesses and large education providers. However, it may be that students are not as excited about using language learning applications for private study as might be supposed. A ground-breaking study by Trinder (op. cit.) involving an Austrian group of students not only found that the majority deliberately engage in online activities to improve their English, but also that, dictionary apps aside, they rated the informal use of English mobile media content (for instance, on videos, audio clips, online news or information websites) for learning purposes as considerably more beneficial than the use of dedicated language apps. Other research into informal language, though limited in quantity, learning provides tentative support for Trinder, such as Li (2015), who found adolescent learners were increasingly becoming engaged in social media for the express purpose of improving their language, and Lai (2015), who discovered students were turning to Facebook, Whatsapp and You Tube as deliberate language learning tools. This may indicate that students themselves believe the structured materials presented in mobile apps are not the best way for them to learn their language, perhaps stemming from a mind-set that being successful in language use is not merely about learning words and structures, but rather to do with the knowledge of how language is used in real situations. It could be suggested, therefore, that these students agree with the language teaching community line that one will not obtain everything needed from quantifiable, decontextualized language learning tasks, and that institutionalised, formulaic and mass-produced language materials, whether in the

form of course books or mobile apps, are just a small part of the jigsaw when learning what is really needed to survive and thrive in an English speaking world. Such beliefs align well with the principles of CLT and would represent a distancing from behaviourist/ structuralist approaches that are not rooted in realistic language situations (such as in Duolingo), calling into question whether app usage actually does equate with language learning preference. Additionally, students in Trinder's study made the insightful observation that communicating on a mobile was not the same as face-to-face interaction because there were no features of discourse such as emotions and body language. Though the potential to provide realistic interaction on mobiles through real-time video chat has been examined in some recent studies (for example, Sivakumar, 2015), the in-class context remains predominately the best place to provide these features of discourse which learners noted to be lacking in the out-of-class context. The benefit of the classroom is, of course, that learning and communicative practice can take place with the guidance of an expert, provides added purpose and supplies other students to practice communication with in an environment that captures a rich diversity of discourse features.

Although it is undeniable that more research is needed, what we know so far leads to this picture:

- Mobiles devices provide a world of language learning not just through dedicated apps, but where everything is a potential learning opportunity if actioned through the language one wishes to learn (i.e. mobiles provide INPUT)
- Mobiles devices do NOT provide most of the realistic communicative practice opportunities that they need (i.e. private learning through mobiles is severely limited in OUTPUT)
- Students, on the whole, agree MALL is fun and engaging in the classroom (i.e. classes give them the MOTIVATION).

Before we look at the possible implications for the individual teacher and the ELT teaching industry in general, it is worth looking at how teachers are implementing MALL.

## **5. Teacher use of MALL**

Latest research suggests that mobile phone based tasks are appearing more and more within teaching. In a recent study on lecturers, half of those questioned stated their students' online practices were influencers of their teaching choices, with many mentioning their desire to integrate informal mobile learning in their practice (Toffoll & Socket op. cit.). A study by Pereira (2015) on such teachers discovered that they predominately use MALL to deliver content (e.g. videos from Youtube), to practise or revise through games (e.g. Kahoot), to allow students to create own content and to both share and collaborate on work (e.g. Glogster, Keynote). It is evident that MALL was used by these teachers to provide input and enhance motivation, which mirrors the conclusions on student needs in the section above.

Observations accompanying Pereira's study indicated that classes where teachers did these things were characterised by 'a higher level of learner involvement, more engaging learning opportunities, and a move from teacher led instruction to student centred pedagogy' (op. cit.: p25). Therefore, it could be suggested that the use of MALL in these classrooms resulted in a more communicative environment than might have been the case without the use of mobiles.

## **6. Problems and Solutions**

All the same, the need to convince teachers more globally that use of mobile devices in the classroom can be effective, both practically and in terms of leading to successful outcomes, remains a challenge. MacCallum, Jeffery & Kinshuk (2014) state two barriers to a teacher facilitating MALL within classroom learning; they must first believe it is useful and, furthermore, they need to find it easy to use. In relation to the first point, Burston (op. cit.) observes that, in general, there has been a failure in teachers, industries and in literature itself to show where the connection can be made between MALL technology and teaching pedagogy. Possibilities for rectifying this situation now exist. Pedagogic models are emerging, such as that put forward by Kukulska-Hulme, Lee & Norris (2017) which emphasises the role of teacher choice in selecting mobile application features that are beneficial, particularly those facilitating multimodal communication, collaboration and language rehearsal. Further suggestions are made below. As well as a pedagogic blueprint, a commitment to training in MALL pedagogy also needs establishing. Some ad-hoc courses exist, for instance, those provided by the British Study Centres and The Consultants-E, but most major teacher training courses lack proper attention to MALL, with some not even referencing the field and merely considering the technology from the students' perspectives, consequently ignoring the teacher's role in selecting mobile-sourced tasks appropriately (Kukulska-Hulme et al., op. cit.). Deeper exploration of the rich potential offered by MALL

would be welcomed in these courses, along with a greater uptake in relevant training as part of continuing professional development undertaken by established teachers.

A further consideration is that mobile application programmers now have an established place in language education. In order that future applications can be made to work usefully for teachers and students, practitioners need to find ways to work with these programmers rather than apart from them. Some successful collaborations have already occurred, such as outlined in Hung & Young (2015) who designed a project implementing a gamified approach in order to aid classroom interaction, and executed the project through a mobile application which they co-authored with the software solutions wing of an international innovation group. Outcomes from the study revealed “better immersion and interactions” within the classroom (ibid). However, such examples remain few and far between, and consequently the most recent overviews of language apps still find them for the most part to ignore contextual factors within language and interactive potential (e.g. Heil et al., 2016). For more similar work to happen, there is a need to win hearts and minds of both the educators and the technicians; both need persuading that there will ultimately be financial benefits, whilst educators also need convincing of the pedagogic benefits of apps produced with communicative principles in mind. It would be encouraging to see larger education providers exploring the potential in this, both for their own and the wider benefit; this could be achieved through approaching private software producers, utilising in-house technological teams, or, in college settings, facilitating collaborations between language departments and technology departments; the added benefit of the latter two options being the possibility for teachers to own more control at the design stage of applications.

The second point, concerning the ease of using technology, needs even more careful consideration. So far, most of the work on MALL has focused on the use of apps, but a focus on apps alone may be unsatisfactory from the perspective of the classroom tutor, since apps require learning and installing. A teacher may be happy to learn the occasional app, but no teacher wants to continually lose hours of their week learning how to use the latest language learning software, nor do they want to regularly lose considerable periods at the start of a lesson training their students in how to use yet another an app, costing valuable learning time and making students wonder if they would have been better off studying at home. Furthermore, installing apps, then teaching students to install these apps and dealing with technical issues, is not what teachers signed up to when they entered the language teaching occupation. However, if we bear in mind the findings of Trindle (op. cit.), the obsession with

learning how to use apps may be barking up the wrong tree, and indeed may be missing a far more practical way in which MALL could be introduced effectively in our classrooms.

### **7. A case for smartphones and a “Communicative Approach”**

If students recognise it is not learning apps but authentic input that they most need to become proficient users of a language, as Trindle’s study suggests, then teachers can meet that need by using the mobile device not as an app-store but as a source of classroom input. In this situation, the teacher no longer needs to be the technical expert, because he will merely be asking students to retrieve content by doing what they already know how to do on their phones (a few simple examples would be retrieving photos, videos, maps and weather forecasts, though the possibilities are extensive) or perhaps directing students to English content websites through ordinary browser apps. In this way, everyone in the classroom wins. Students use their devices within the boundaries of already established usage so there is no time wasted by the teacher or student on app learning. Mobile devices are exploited for their ability to provide authentic, relevant and personal content (key pillars of a communicative classroom). The classroom context remains relevant because the teacher has a key role in providing students with guidance in content selection and in both understanding and using the language they encounter. Finally, students also have a classroom in which to hone what they have learnt and use it as a springboard towards realistic communicative output with all the benefits of a face-to-face environment.

Furthermore, for the convinced communicative language teacher, this approach also has the potential to make it easier to implement beliefs about teaching. Traditional approaches are limited to the use of one printed text or audio track for content for all students. The mobile device, however, means that any text or audio track is available at any time, so long as it is freely available through the internet. This opens up greater possibilities for students to have self-autonomy in their choice of text to study, which may make the content and learning more authentic than ever before. No more would business students have to spend a lesson, regardless of how nice it is, studying the history of Machu Pichu, just because that is how the course book wants to introduce the past perfect tense; through the mobile device, students have the means for finding their own text, relevant and personal to their individual situation, and it does not need to be the same as the one the student sitting next to them is reading. This all can take place without the teacher even having to possess a mobile device in the classroom, let alone installing an app.

Burston (op cit.) sums up the potential well: ‘a constructivist, collaborative, learner-centred teaching approach can provide a solid pedagogical foundation for the effective exploitation of MALL’ (p.1). The view of MALL set out in this paper fits well with the hypothesis that smartphones do indeed have the potential to take language teaching to a place it could not have gone to before. Clearly, many of the ideas presented here need testing in order to establish what is and what is not reasonably possible, and what the pitfalls of such approaches might be. However, far from being the enemy, the smartphone may actually end up the hero if what is being suggested here is followed. In synthesising what has been set out in this article, the following principles could be put forward:

1. Students need *mobile devices* to get authentic, relevant and meaningful input.
2. They need the *teacher* to help make sense of the input.
3. They need the *classroom*, the *teacher* and (to a lesser extent) the *technology* to produce and receive feedback on meaningful output.

It could be suggested that MALL may have resulted in control being taken away from the teacher in recent years. However, MALL can be used by the teacher to take back control for themselves and their learners, enabling the implementation of strategies that further communicative competence in learners in ways previously hard to achieve. Many spheres of society have already seen and seized the potential for mobile devices to work for their benefit. This is the moment in time for language teachers to realise that they can do the same. Otherwise, we may have to endure the agendas of others being imposed upon us.

**[Word count: 3868]**

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