

Promoting French language acquisition via Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)*

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Abstract

The students in the Indian context need to equip themselves with skills to become global citizens. Yet, we find French foreign language teaching in our country confined to textbook and teacher centred, something that discourages young learners especially those are living in a country where the target language is not spoken. We can also state that learners are not motivated to the right kind of French foreign language acquisition and thus there is a very urgent need to find solutions for our students to keep abreast in the global scenario. Learning of a foreign language means the need to develop in the learner the ability to communicate in the social environment of the spoken language. Hoping that by incorporating Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) into French foreign language classes, we could motivate our young learners to acquire spoken and written communication of French. With MALL, the students do not have to sit in a classroom or at a computer to get learning materials. Hence, MALL can be considered as a perfect solution to language acquisition in terms of time and place. This paper highlights the role, advantages and challenges of MALL in promoting French language Acquisition so that young Indians students can study, work or compete with their peers internationally. It reflects also on how mobile language learning has developed to date and suggest directions for the future.

Keywords: foreign language learning, foreign language acquisition, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

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Introduction

The present-day educational scenario demands innovative pedagogical practices in higher education. It has become necessary that our students equip themselves with skills and competences to become global citizens. In recent decades, mobile devices have become useful educational tools, holding great potentiality for language learning activities. Thus, we witness the growth of a new field in language teaching and learning; the so-called mobile assisted language learning (MALL). The adoption of mobile technology in education renders new learning experiences and flexibility in learning – learning anywhere and anytime –with augmented opportunities for learning across multiple contexts, via social and content interactions and also using our own electronic devices. MALL enhances foreign language teaching and learning by taking learners into the real world. At the same time, it is accentuated that mobile devices are not substitutes for existing learning devices, but they serve as props for learning in a new environment having new capabilities. This paper highlights the role, advantages and challenges of MALL in promoting French language Acquisition so that young Indians students can study, work or compete with their peers internationally.

What is “MALL”?

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) is the new trending approach to language learning that is assisted or enhanced by using handheld mobile devices such as cellphones, MP3 and MP4 players, notebooks, data storage devices, PDAs and iPad. Furthermore, since mobile technologies have evolved, so also the advanced applications for language education have developed. We find in addition to the traditional purpose for oral communication via mobile phones; the current multifunctional mobile technology facilitates users to access to the Internet for locating and searching information, emailing, reading e-books, and even shopping. Moreover, with the emergence of the third generation (3G) mobile services have the potential of becoming a

widely used effective learning tool, and of making M-learning the next wave of any learning environment.

Advantages of MALL:

1. Mobility in learning:- The most important advantage of MALL technology is its ubiquitous access to learning anytime at any place. MALL has been successfully used outside the classroom, as well as in the classroom and in resource-poor environments. In fact, learners can learn every time and everywhere they are.

2. Portability:- Mobile devices can be taken to different places due to its small size and weight. Learners are benefitting because of the portability factor of mobile media and thereby taking advantage of their convenience.

3. Interactivity of the learning process:- Mobile devices provide the students with the opportunity of close interaction, conversation and decision-making among the peers of their group due to the specific design of the learning activity on mobile phones.

4. Connectivity:- mobile devices of students can be interconnected: it may be data collection devices, or a common network by creating a shared network.

5. Affordability:- When we compare with other wireless devices such as laptops or computers, mobile phones are rather inexpensive having functions as Internet browsers available in most devices.

6. Autonomy:- Teacher may be absent, students can do self-study with the help of mobile assisted language apps.

7. Individuality:- There are platforms these days where activities can be customized for the individual learner: the learner controls the learning process and progress in his/her own space based on his/her cognitive level.

Challenges of MALL:

1. Small screen:- There is reading difficulty on such a screen and there is data storage, and multimedia limitations.

2. Distractions:- When we permit students access to dictionaries and other online information for learning during class time, the same use is inappropriate during a quiz. At the same time, watching videos that are not related to the lesson, playing online games, and using social

networks for connecting with friends but not in the target language are inappropriate uses of the device during class and may lead to class Language Classroom disruptions.

3. Lacks Tracking of performance:- It is difficult to monitor students' activities or record their performance and progress. In addition, any new approach to learning requires the training of the students to utilize new tools.

4. Technical Problems:- Using digital devices in the classroom requires the teachers to spend a substantial amount of time planning for the lessons, training with the hardware before the commencement of classes and the teacher needs to spend more time during class to distribute the devices and returning them after class. The amount of time spent during class to teach the student how to use the devices is significant. Moreover, some technical problems may arise during class such as network failures and individual students having problems with the hardware require the teacher to troubleshoot the issues as well as instructing individual students on how to resolve problems.

5. Disconnecting:- Some teachers believe that learners spend too much time with digital devices, which contribute to an alienation of students in the classroom. They believe that language students should spend time in a classroom doing group activities that contribute to social interaction.

MALL for Promoting French Language Learning and Teaching

The following are some tested areas where MALL has supported French students at Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, India to achieve better acquisition of the French language and professionally perfect their French language skills:

1. Learning Vocabulary reinforcing

The type of activities focusing on vocabulary learning with the support of mobile phone are many and it depends on the level of language proficiency of the learners. The teacher started sending e-mail or SMS to students for them to learn new vocabulary based on the lessons covered in the classroom. The Learners were provided with some tailored vocabulary practices based on activities performed in the classroom. They are, then, asked to complete them on their mobile phones and send them back to their teachers. Vocabulary learning was also accompanied

by the pictorial annotation shown on learners' mobile devices for a better understanding of the new words.

2. Listening Comprehension

The teacher selected some listening exercises which she shared with her students. The students either worked alone or in small groups. This was considered the most important stage in learning a foreign language. Students listened to native speakers and exposed themselves to the cultural aspect of the foreign language while learning the language. It was found that using technology led the learners into being more motivated, imaginative and creative.

3. Learning Grammar

The teacher used the 'Duolingo French Learning App' to reinforce Grammatical points taught in class and after lessons it was usually followed by a session of multiple-choice activities where learners had to select the correct answer from the given alternatives. If doubts still persists grammatical explanations were also presented to learners in class the next day.

4. Pronunciation

We have, these days the second generation of mobile devices which enable their users to access multimedia functions including listening and speaking ones. Therefore, the students were asked to download dictionaries with sound functions so that they could learn the right pronunciation of unfamiliar or new words. At the same time, the students were asked to read aloud and record their voice too. With which, the teacher made a better assessment of the students' progress and weaknesses in pronunciation. Then, they compared their voice with an ideal pronunciation and corrected themselves.

Conclusion

Today's French foreign language learners are trying to acquire foreign language communicative competence which is the need of the day either for their profession or for socializing. Thus, the rapidly developing mobile device technology and omnipresent ownership of mobile devices seem to have an impact on foreign language education. Also, the development of mobile technologies as the new frontiers for teaching and learning has generated a great amount of

motivation and excitement among practitioners and academicians as we see a paradigm shifts from traditional setting to innovative learning environments. More important is the fact that students have achieved more autonomy through MALL. Thus, we find learning a foreign language through MALL has inevitably increased. In fact, the studies from Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, India implies that one can provide a richer, more efficient and faster learning environment through mobile phones for our language learners. In other words, MALL can be considered an ideal solution to language learning barriers in terms of time and place. In recent times, educationalists in India are considering to provide a more convenient environment for the learners to learn a foreign language as one of the strategic educational goals towards improving the Indian students' achievement. Furthermore, the future research on MALL needs to explore the teachers' perspective on the use of MALL, in that it would be meaningful to find out 'academic' views on the issue from the users in educational context.

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