

MALL: Resorting to Mobiles in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

In the language learning environment, whereas the previous generation tools were computer-based systems (CALL for Computer Assisted Language Learning) dependent on University set ups, the mobile technology has revolutionised collaborative learning opportunities with Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) taking its place. Teacher-student and student-student interaction via mobile applications such as WhatsApp Groups (WAGs) can optimise class time and individual problem solving, while at the same time, reversing the conventional pattern of learning where the teacher introduces new knowledge followed by student activities and homework, most of which is beyond teacher or collaborative assistance. Among other things, we are talking of the Flipped Classroom here where an idea is introduced via WhatsApp Group before the class, giving the learners time and opportunity to read up beforehand saving precious class time for interactive activities and learner participation (as opposed to class time being devoted to lecture). This paper examined the possibilities of using this tool to maximise language learning in the EFL class in Saudi Arabia, reviewed previous studies on the efficacy of ICT and other technological tools in foreign language learning and evaluated learning outcomes after using MALL for new vocabulary available in the language learning apps MyWordBook2 and Johnny Grammar's Word Challenge over a period of six weeks with two groups of sixty participants each. The findings as evident in the pre and post tests indicated that learners could be engaged better with the learning process with the use of MALL. They also felt motivated towards the learning process and felt that their learning experience got enhanced with the new tool. Their vocabulary retention and usage also benefitted from the interventional tool.

Keywords: Mobile assisted language learning; EFL; Learning.



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1. Introduction

WhatsApp is today a popular social networking App engaging user of all ages across languages. However, any technology that already exists need not prove just as useful for educational purposes as it does as a social medium. For this, learners have to be re-trained and teachers have to understand empathetically that their learners will have preferences of usage, ie the learners may not use the particular technology for learning as readily as they would for social purposes. In other words, learners have to be trained to change the orientation of technology use from non-academic to academic purposes. This has also been pointed out by Murray *et al.* (2008). Even so, individual learners may respond differently to the idea in terms of 'acceptance and preferences' as reported by Kennedy and Levy (2008). The idea of using a mobile app for vocabulary enrichment was welcomed by the respondents in this study: these were one hundred and twenty sophomore students of English at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. It may be useful to point out here that the technology scene is actually very specialised in Saudi Arabia. With smartphones becoming more accessible in terms of cost to the Saudis, more than 70% of the people own these and connect to the internet through the device. Students are especially fond of using it to access information, revise coursework and even to prepare presentations. Amongst the young population, virtual social media such as Snapchat and Instagram are very popular. Irrespective of gender, socio-economic status, or age, college students in the country own and carry their smartphones at all times and in all places Al-Fahad (2009). Positive attitudes prevail among both the teachers and students to the use of smartphones in higher education. This trend is similar across genders as indicated by other studies. In language learning, learners are often seen using the popular translating apps to find words even during class hour. Though such a practice is discouraged for obvious reasons, it goes to show the usefulness and efficacy of technology in fulfilling educational gaps. However, sometimes these very devices turn into barriers in education as their tendency to distract the learners from learning to other less desirable engagements is well known and established. Saudi Arabia is still in early stages of developing a sound base for incorporating smartphones as educational tools. But given the fact that the young people are practically inseparable from their devices makes it imperative for the teaching community to think up ingenious ways to effectively use these to the best benefit of their learners (Metsämuuronen, 2018). This study used the two apps developed by the British Council for the L2 learners of English: My Word Book 2 and Johnny Grammar's Word Challenge to evaluate the usefulness of apps in enhancing learners' vocabulary. The vocabulary exposure to MyWordBook2 was linked to collaborative learning over a WhatsApp Group formed specifically for the purpose. The experiment spread over six weeks and at the end of every

week, Johny Grammar's Word Challenge was used in the class to conduct quizzes to provide the necessary competitive input and challenge to the learners, while at the same time, enabling the researcher to gauge the effectiveness of the new tool in actual vocabulary improvement of the learners. The premise was that there are evidenced studies to show improved inter-personal interaction, learner engagement with the content and better understanding of the content with the use of apps (Al-Fahad, 2009; Hwang *et al.*, 2015; Lopez *et al.*, 2014).

2. Statement of the Research Problem

EFL teachers are particularly strained in all environments with the task of engaging learners' attention: a prerequisite for learning to occur. Technology can offer an answer here. Glasser (2000), noted: humans retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear. The EFL classroom in KSA has a predominance of reading and hearing with the teacher being at the centre of the action. Indeed edutainment is the new ruler of the roost. The onus to creatively integrate technology into the curriculum lies on the teachers since the learners are well entrenched into using it in practically all aspects of life, weaning them into using the same for educational outcomes sometimes proves to be a great challenge. Smartphones today come loaded (or the option to load) with Apps which are actually specialised tools. So also language learning apps. However, whether a specific app fits the curricular, sociological, political, economic and learning outcome matrix is for the teachers to evaluate. We zeroed in on MyWordBook2 and Johny Grammar's as these are available in Saudi Arabia and the language level is suitable to the average EFL college learner's. As stated earlier, the popularity of smartphones has increased exponentially in the region, with children having their own devices by the age of twelve, its educational uses are still to be fully explored. WhatsApp has been in use as a doubt clearing portal between learners and teachers but more on a one-to-one basis but is beginning to be used as a virtual class outside the classroom. Through this study we propose to examine whether MALL, especially, WhatsApp can effectively tilt the balance and positively influence learning outcomes (Pilar *et al.*, 2013).

3. Significance of the Study

Most importantly, this study is significant to the learners who are final beneficiaries of the huge resources pumped by the administration and policy makers into the EFL departments all over the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Less significant are the benefits that accrue to a nation with a qualified and enabled youth force. The outcomes may also be useful to the Ministry of Education, policy makers and curriculum designers in crystallising ideas on the use of smartphones in EFL settings. Moreover, the app making industry is growing at an alarming rate with apps catering to practically every need of the users, irrespective of the sometimes smaller numbers. The study can place the needs of the Saudi learners in context, and encourage development of specific educational and language apps to cater to the Saudi segment.

4. Research Objectives

The paper has the following objectives:

1. Seeking learner input on the technology that most engages them in the EFL classroom.
2. Evaluating the efficacy of using mobile learning tools in the Saudi EFL environment.
3. Devising pedagogical means to integrate MALL into the teaching-learning process in the given learning environment.

5. Research Questions

Consequently, the study tries to answer these questions:

1. Is there a MALL app available that suits the language learning needs of the Saudi EFL learners?
2. Can the app, if available, be utilised effectively to meet the pedagogical needs of the EFL teachers?
3. Does the use of the app affect the learning outcomes, and if yes, then is this statistically significant?

6. Literature Review

In a small scale study, Tileston (2011) found that contextualising MALL can improve both language input and related attitudes of learners. Agca and Özdemir (2013), used 2D barcode technology over a period of two weeks in a study on the use of mobile technologies in foreign (English) language vocabulary learning. They concluded that mobile assisted learning environment increased students' level of vocabulary for the target words and the students felt positively disposed towards the new environment. The efficacy of current mobile applications in EFL has been examined in a Spanish study by Rodríguez, With over 28000 educational apps available in the market, they stress the need to understand well the features that are effective and suitable for learners using MALL. Rahimi and Miri (2014) investigated the impact of mobile dictionary on use on language learning and found that the experimental group that had used a mobile dictionary far outperformed the control group that did the same exercise with a printed one. Danesh and Amiri (2015), found a positive correlation between the use of MALL and high school learners' motivation to learn English. Susanti and Tarmuji (2016), used WAGs to initiate writing exercises of three types for the senior high school EFL learners in Indonesia. The remarkable features were real time learner responses emphasising critical thinking and learner involvement at every stage in the study. Wu and Huang (2017), concluded that students who were exposed to mobile game-based English vocabulary exhibited higher attention and learning attentiveness among other things. That adults and children alike found mobile gaming useful in familiarizing with

another language was demonstrated by [Rusman et al. \(2018\)](#) who used the “Elena goes shopping” mobile game for familiarization with the pronunciation among other things. That the best of intentions and planning to bring technology to the language classroom can go awry as gaps may exist between students’ perception of how they would use mobile phones in the classrooms and their actual use was shown by [Bartholomew and Reeve \(2018\)](#). Twelve research papers and case studies were reviewed [Shadiev et al. \(2018\)](#) to demonstrate that novel technologies can support authentic edutainment. In a recent study, Aljaloud, concluded that in the Saudi context, the use of Clicker Apps (Apps which give immediate response) better engaged the female students rather than their male counterparts. This is a significant finding as such conclusions were not reported by any other previous study with Saudi learners ([Aljaloud et al., 2019](#); [Baykalova et al., 2018](#)).

7. Theoretical Framework

Learning in today’s classrooms has found a new paradigm with technology coming to the forefront both as a teaching tool and as a medium of learning. Unlike the teacher, technology tools go beyond the classroom walls and provide an equal learning opportunity for all learners within and outside the class. Finally, technology is in tandem with the way students learn in our times.

The acronym MALL stands for Mobile Assisted Language Learning and was developed as *Dynabook* in the 1980s by PARC (Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre) as a tablet like device that could be taken anywhere and used anywhere as an e-learning machine. This was an instant hit with universities in Asia and Europe where it continues to be researched and developed. Its later versions in the 2000s were *MOBILearn* and *eMapps* (Motivating Active Participation of Primary Schoolchildren) till the development of the modern smartphones with their unlimited possibilities of access to information, flexibility, unlimited mobility, independent learning opportunities, intractability, efficiency and collaborative learning choices. Clearly, MALL is the next generation answer to foreign language learning.

Given this premise, this paper examines the success of MALL in the EFL environment of Saudi learners.

8. Methodology

This was a quasi-experimental study carried out on two planes. One, we examined the previous research on the efficacy of MALL as a learning tool for foreign languages. Two, we took the investigation to the classroom by evaluating learning outcomes on a group of learners exposed to two learning apps and WhatsApp as tools for language learning. Pre and post tests were conducted to gauge the usefulness of MALL as a tool for learning foreign language vocabulary. The language under study was English. One hundred and twenty students of the BA Course at Qassim University were chosen as the subjects which contained half as many female students and all participants were in the age bracket of 19 and 23. A fifteen-item questionnaire to gauge their perceptions on the use of technology for language learning was administered. This was based on the Likert Scale and all questions were duly supported by previous studies.

At the outset, a test was administered to determine the language status of the learners in both the control and experimental groups, each comprising sixty students. The control group was given the words generated by the MyWordBook 2 app on a daily basis, and as is the prevailing practice in vocabulary exercises in the class, were asked to ‘prepare’ the new words, in other words, they were required to learn the new word with limited or no technological intervention in tune with the prevalent pedagogy. The experimental group was started with forming a WAG as a reinforcement and doubt clearing portal with the teacher as the administrator. Over the period of six weeks, on a daily basis, ten minutes of class time was devoted to allowing the learners to use the MyWordBook 2 app in class, collaborate with their classmates and take notes in case of doubts. They were asked to come to the WhatsApp group specially formed for the purpose to discuss these doubts. Discussion was encouraged on the WAG (WhatsApp Group) amongst the students while the teacher was asked to freely offer inputs. The researcher too was a participant on the group. Each subsequent class hour started with a brief update of the previous day’s WAG activities.

The experiment lasted six weeks at the end of which another evaluation was conducted on both the groups. Students’ performance was statistically compared for pre and post test correlation.

9. Findings and Discussion

Learner perception and motivation ([Alizadeh, 2016](#); [Gilakjani et al., 2012](#); [Zaman, 2015](#)) play a significant role in the success or failure of the achievement of learning objectives. Hence the importance of understanding and evaluating the ground before a new pedagogical tool is put into use. The questionnaire used with the respondents in this study was aimed to understand their perceptions on the use of technology, and more specifically, mobile apps in learning new vocabulary. Saudi EFL learners find the acquisition of new vocabulary particularly challenging, removed as it is from context, with the syllabus demanding mugging up of new words without any emphasis on their usage. When the idea of seeking learner opinion on the use of MALL as a vocabulary learning tool was first floated, there was much resistance from the student community as they felt inhibited in expressing themselves. However, after a session assuring them of complete secrecy of their views and convincing them of their contribution to a noble cause, learner response was overwhelming.

Following set of statements were used to gather data on learner perception on technology use in the EFL class. As per [Falk and Miller \(1992\)](#), values higher than 0.50 indicate statistical significance for a construct to be

considered acceptable. Accordingly, descriptive statistics was used to derive these values for the responses to the questionnaire statements.

Table-1. Learner Perception of the use of MALL as a vocabulary learning aid Instructions: Please indicate to what extent you agree with each statement:

No.	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	Use of smartphones in class distracts me.					
2.	I better understand the English vocabulary with the use of technology like MALL.					
3.	I am likely to opt out of regular classes if I can learn new words via MALL.					
4.	I want to use MALL as I believe it will help me improve my scores in the exam.					
5.	I would be tempted to use the smartphone for social purposes if allowed to use it in class.					
6.	I think the use of apps can help me understand English better than I do otherwise.					
7.	I wish my teachers would integrate more technology like learning apps into teaching of English vocabulary.					
8.	With MALL I will have the freedom of space and time in my learning.					
9.	Use of mobile apps will motivate me to learn new words outside the classroom.					
10.	I think with the use of MALL I would be able to collaborate with my peers more meaningfully.					
11.	With the use of MALL I would feel more interested in the learning process in class.					
12.	I believe the use of apps and collaboration with my peers will improve my career and employment prospects.					
13.	Technology makes me feel ‘connected’ to the subject among other things.					
14.	In-class use of mobile will create a digital divide as some of us do not have a smartphone.					
15.	Use of MALL will help me connect to my teachers more efficiently.					

Table 2 below presents the statistical outcomes for the statements tested.

Table-2. Learner Perception of the use of MALL as a vocabulary learning aid: Standardised Factor

Construct	Statement	>0.50
Interaction with teacher	I wish my teachers would integrate more technology like learning apps into teaching of English vocabulary.	0.928
	Use of MALL will help me connect to my teachers more effectively.	0.876
Collaborative learning facilitation	I think with the use of MALL I would be able to collaborate with my peers more meaningfully.	0.944
	Technology makes me feel ‘connected’ among other things.	0.954
Engagement with learning process	I better understand the English vocabulary with the use of technology like MALL.	0.859
	I want to use MALL as I believe it will help me improve my scores in the	0.912

	exam.	
	I am likely to opt out of regular classes if I can learn new words via MALL.	0.972
Active learning	I think the use of apps can help me understand English better than I do otherwise.	0.887
	With MALL I have the freedom of space and time in my learning.	0.850
	Use of mobile apps will motivate me to learn new words outside the classroom.	0.933
	With the use of MALL I would feel more interested in the learning process in class.	0.921
Social constructs	Use of smartphones in class distracts me.	0.956
	In-class use of mobiles will create a digital divide as some of us do not have a smartphone.	0.996
	I would be tempted to use the smartphone for social purposes if allowed to use it in class.	0.813
	I believe the use of apps and collaboration with my peers will improve my career and employment prospects.	0.875

Thus, all items were found fit to be accepted. Internal coherence using Cronbach's alpha coefficient also gave values higher than the recommended 0.70 and as shown in Table 2 the *p* value was also greater than the recommended 0,50.

10. Pre and Post Intervention Mean Scores in Control and Experimental Groups

In the pre-test the mean scores of the respondents were 43.1 for Control group and 42.8 for Experimental group. As can be seen there was a marginal difference of 0.3 in the mean scores of the two groups. It may be reminded here that at the time of the test both groups were exposed only to the conventional 'mug up' vocabulary retention methodology popular with the EFL classes. In an intervention spanning six weeks, two MALL apps viz, MyWordBook2 for learning new vocabulary and Johnny Grammar's Word Challenge for conducting sixty second in-class quizzes were used with the sixty participants in the experimental group. This group was also connected to the teacher and among themselves using WhatsApp mainly for clearing doubts and sharing new knowledge. The researcher would like to disclose that the average daily exchange related to the new vocabulary over this portal was over one hundred messages with even the reticent learners being actively involved. Collaboration was the high point of WhatsApp interaction with participants coming up with innovation to help their peers see new words in the right perspective. Unlike class, teacher participation was rather subdued with occasional gentle reminders to keep exchanges limited to academic purposes. Overall, the researcher felt overwhelmed at the extent of learner involvement and real learning that took place, which was also reflected in the post-test scores. The post-test mean scores of the respondents were 42.6 for Control group and 7.9 for Experimental group:

11. Conclusions and Recommendations

Expanding mobile devices varies many aspects of our lives, from how to work and communicate to learning. In fact, the emergence of smart devices like mobile phones and tablets has sparked the revolution of learning. There is also a wealth of evidence that mobile platforms support high-quality e-learning experiences, which illustrate the benefits of learning. Current estimates indicate that more than half of the organizations currently use mobile devices as a powerful e-learning tool in their employees' training programs. The number of these organizations is rising rapidly, as mobile learning is infinitely effective.

Learning with mobile, by eliminating the need for learning at a specific time and place, has created learning flexibility. Today, the mobile has enhanced the learning flexibility by creating educational content such as video, podcast, and other multimedia formats that are available on smartphones and tablets. Additionally, individuals are able to access this content on their mobile devices at any time and place, which increases the flexibility of learning.

English is one of the most popular languages for learning, perhaps even the most widely used language in the world is English. Many people choose to learn a language in order to have a better and more secure place, or to be able to communicate more effectively with the whole world. English is probably a popular language for learning, but does not necessarily mean that it can easily be mastered because people are faced with many challenges when learning English. Today, the use of mobile to learn the language has become widespread.

This study found that MyWordBook2 and Johnny Grammar's Word Challenge were effective as vocabulary building apps and also as platforms for collaborative learning both on student-student and student-teacher level. Learner involvement and motivation also showed northward movement as learners found the use of MALL as being effective in gaining new vocabulary in English, something they found particularly distasteful in the previous 'mug up' method. On all constructs tested in the study, use of MALL showed positive correlation and helped create awareness on the desirable implications of the integration of technology into the language learning classrooms. In the background of the fact that young people are practically inseparable from their devices, it would be a right decision for the teachers to develop it into a strength rather than a drawback for their classrooms. After all, the continuity,

ease of access and immense collaborative potential of these devices can never be beaten by human interface which would always be limited, governed as it is by human shortcomings.

The relatively small number of participants was a limitation of this study which makes generalising of the conclusions rather difficult. Therefore, it is recommended to repeat similar studies with larger participant groups and also check the outcomes with other language learning apps to understand which of these are most suitable to the specific needs of the Saudi learners of English. We also need to replicate similar studies with learners of other foreign languages to arrive at a better equation between learner and curricular needs and available technology. It may be efficacious for EFL teachers in the meanwhile to devote a part of the class time to these apps as it is only by doing that teachers and learners can learn to fulfil their needs.

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