

# Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) to Enhance English Language Learning: Ideas and Constraints

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on ideas and constraints in utilizing smartphones in language learning. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) needs to be explored more by the teachers and curriculum developers as the use of mobile devices is massively widespread. Considering students' access to smartphones, internet access, also the cost, practical usage, and workload in implementing MALL, it is important then to see what ideas that can be implemented in language learning activities by utilizing smartphones. The ideas in implementing MALL include utilizing features available in smartphones such as camera features, audio recording features, messaging and chatting application, social media engagement, language learning application, and learning management system. This article also proceeds to describe the possible constraints in implementing the ideas which have to be overcome to make an effective language learning design involving smartphones as pedagogical tools. As mobile devices have already become parts of daily activities, therefore language learning teachers and curriculum developers have to utilize them and design mobile-assisted learning activities that can help students to get more experience in learning a language.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL), which is one type of mobile learning, may help students to learn English better. Instead of learning a language by traditional ways, most students now seem to prefer mobile learning. It is believed that mobile learning can help students to develop conversational skills, technological skills, and collaborative skills which can leverage their learning outcomes (Al-Emran et al., 2016). Mobile learning can also occur anywhere and anytime (Corbeil & Valdes-Corbeil, 2007), let the teachers personalize the learning process (Steel, 2012), and allow students to control their learning (Sha et al., 2012). Because of those potentials of mobile learning, it is now possible to design various learning activities to enhance students' language skills.

Mobile phones, or popularly known as smartphones, nowadays are not only used for communication, but also as tools for finding information, playing games, watching movies, etc. As Arifin (2015) says that smartphones make it easy to communicate, learn, and solve problems, smartphones now become a need for everyone. Market competition in the smartphone industry also in fact produces relatively affordable products which as can be seen now people can have a smartphone or more. Therefore, It is now a common thing that people are using smartphones in their daily activities including working and studying.

Some time ago, e-learning only became supplementary learning, let aside mobile learning. But it is slowly changing as the information technology keeps developing rapidly. In addition, Covid-19 has forced conventional learning to be changed into learning from



home. This phenomenon makes gadgets become crucial in learning, because most learning activities have to be done with laptops or smartphones. However, the transition from traditional learning to E-learning in Covid-19 pandemic can be considered successful because it allows everyone to gain experience and knowledge that can be useful in the future which will force a new set of platforms, regulations, laws, and solution for future cases (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Covid-19 also made mobile learning an essential in higher education which makes it possible for students to collaborate and share ideas in the learning process (Nacir et. al., 2020). As Covid-19 slowly fading, a question then arises, is mobile learning still relevant today?

As mobile devices can help students in learning, it is potential to include mobile learning in the learning syllabus and improve the learning following todays' needs. Additionally, with the support of internet access, students now may access anything, anywhere, anytime that they could have more information from their smartphone than from formal learning. It is a good opportunity for teachers and curriculum developers to design a mobile learning for language learning process. Some previous studies already done on MALL such as Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam (2010) who focus on grammar, Montaga (2018) on speaking skills, Hwang et al. (2011) on writing skills, and Papadima-Sophocleous et al. (2012) on reading skills. However, some teachers might not be aware of the potential of MALL, even many teachers have low literacy in information technology (Suhendri et al., 2020; Batubara, 2017). This problem in low literacy will limit the teachers to design a suitable MALL for students. In this case, it is important to provide some ideas and analyze possible constraints so teachers can be aware of how to utilize mobile devices' potential for language learning.

This paper tries to give ideas on how to implement MALL in traditional classes. There are also so many possibilities and variations in implementing MALL which might be interrupted by some constraints. Also, not all teachers are strong enough in utilizing mobile devices for learning activities as some of their literacy in information technology is low. Therefore, ideas and constraints of implementing MALL need to be discussed further.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Mobile phones and other portable devices have shown many potentials that may support teaching and learning processes. It is also driven by the fact that mobile phones are now affordable and relatively cheap (Reinders, 2010). The fact is while almost every student nowadays has a mobile phone, not all learning activities are integrated by using mobile phones. In this case, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) needs to be shown up so that teachers and curriculum developers become aware of using mobile phones in supporting teaching and learning processes.

MALL as an approach was basically the evolution of Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL), E-learning, and M-learning. Rapid development of information technology these past decades has resulted in portable devices that can be brought everywhere, also with the support of internet access, those devices can be used for many things including learning. MALL is possible because of the existence of mobile devices that already shows many potentials in supporting language learning such as in the field of enhancing communicative skills, speaking skills, or listening skills (Golonka et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2011; Kondo et al., 2012; Toland et al., 2016; Shadiev et al., 2020). Thus, utilizing mobile devices in language learning will improve learning experiences of the students during the learning process.

Traditional classes lack mobility which in some conditions students might find it boring and lose their concentration. MALL provides a lot of potential, as long as the teachers are creative in designing the learning process. Students can learn everywhere even when they are walking, traveling, working, riding public transportation, or learning with hands-



free or eye-free (Traxler, 2007) like listening to audio about the lesson. Therefore, students will have mobile learning activities which do not require them to stay in the specific place to learn (Wu et al., 2012).

There are a number of previous MALL studies that have been published. The ideas of MALL emerged since the exploitation of various mobile devices such as cell phones, mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, laptops, and some applications designed for language learning. Previous studies have explored MALL in various aspect such as the effectiveness of mobile language learning in short-term memory (Chen et al., 2008), users' attitudes in experiencing MALL (Nah et al., 2008), language learning enhancement with mobile devices (Allan, 2008; Brown et al., 2012, Gabarre & Gabarre, 2010; Gromik, 2012; Palalas, 2009), correlation of MALL and learner autonomy (Botero et al., 2018; Lai & Zheng, 2018), mobile phones for speaking skill assessment (Cooney & Keogh, 2007; Demouy et al., 2011), designing English for Specific Purposes with MALL (Hoven & Palalas, 2011), using iPad applications for young learners (Yıldız, 2012), and how MALL affect grammar (Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam, 2010; Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Liu & Chen, 2012).

Previous MALL studies also focus on vocabulary learning and language skills. These studies show that MALL can provide new ways of drills in improving English proficiency. Some of the studies are the effect of MP3 and iPad on speaking skills (Al-Jarf, 2012; Montaga, 2018), mobile phone based activities for improving speaking skills (Tuttle, 2013), facilitates writing by using mobile devices (Hwang et al., 2011) and improving reading fluency by using iPod (Papadima-Sophocleous et al., 2012). There are also reports on MALL studies in enhancing communication between teacher-student and student-student, speaking skills, and listening skills (Golonka et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2011; Kondo et al., 2012; Toland et al., 2016) with task-based learning and communicative language teaching as the most common occurrence (Shadiev et al., 2020). Those studies have already confirmed that MALL has a positive impact in a language learning process. Therefore, utilizing mobile devices and implementing MALL will be a good choice in designing language learning activities.

Mobile phones are already so accustomed to people nowadays (Cui & Wang, 2008) that we barely see a person without a mobile phone. In addition, the affordable price of mobile phones, internet access, and electricity supply have made it easier for them to use mobile phones. In this case, considering the potential of mobile phones, the learning curriculum needs to be designed to utilize mobile devices. Students now can learn everywhere using their mobile devices like smartphones as long as they have internet access. Besides, smartphones can store enough data and applications that students do not need to bring a lot of books at the same time because their smartphone can store thousands of books at the same time. Based on those MALL potential from previous studies, the needs of designing MALL curriculum, and the fact that MALL is not very common for some teachers, it is important to list some potential ideas and possible constraints to applying MALL. The aim is to provide guidance for teachers and curriculum developers to utilize mobile devices in the learning process.

## DISCUSSION

Involving mobile devices in learning activities is probably a common thing now. The fact is mobile devices have been used so widely that even students in elementary schools can have and operate one. Some areas may still not have access to mobile devices due to several reasons such as rural/isolated areas, underdeveloped countries, low incomes, etc. However, with the rapid development of information technology, those problems will eventually be solved. Therefore, teachers need to prepare themselves in engaging learning activities with mobile devices.

Smartphones as the most popular mobile device today have already been used by students and teachers. The problem now is how to utilize smartphones in language learning activities. Also, there might be some constraints in applying learning activities which include



the usage of smartphones. Thus, there are some ideas about how to utilize smartphones in language learning and what the possible constraints that might be faced in the process.

### **Ideas for utilizing smartphone in language learning**

Smartphones nowadays have many potentials and can be utilized to optimize the language learning process. Ideas in implementing MALL may be various depending on the situations and goals of each learning process. The design of MALL activities can also be focussed on language basic skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In addition, MALL can also be designed to improve student's engagement in the learning process because it will give a different experience to traditional language learning.

The following are some ideas that can be implemented in language learning by utilizing a smartphone.

#### **Idea 1: Camera features**

Camera is one of the main features of smartphones that allow us to take pictures and record videos. This camera can be used in many ways, for example taking pictures of what teachers wrote on the board; taking pictures of text inside of textbooks; or taking pictures of learning materials to be read from their phone instead of from books. Video recording features can also do many things such as recording their teachers while giving explanations so they can watch their teachers again at home. So, how to optimize the camera features for language learning?

Some language learning activities that can be applied by optimizing camera features of smartphone are:

1. Doing assignments and submitting them by taking pictures.
2. Taking pictures of English materials to be discussed in the class.
3. Giving assignments in the form of video recording, e.g. speech, role play, and drama.
4. Doing learning activities using video call or group video call.

Some relevant studies related to the ideas are Dang et al. (2022) who utilize video recording for speaking skills; Gromik (2015) and Gromik (2012) who study video cameras as a tool for language learning.

#### **Idea 2: Audio Recording features**

Audio recording can also be utilized in language learning activities, especially in listening and speaking skills. Some activities that can be applied by optimizing audio recording features are:

1. Giving assignments in the form of speech or role play that has to be recorded.
2. Giving opinions of certain topics in the form of audio recorded.
3. One student sends the recording, while the other has to listen and give feedback.

Some students may be embarrassed to speak English in front of the class, therefore by recording their voice, they may feel less embarrassed to perform and show their skills in speaking.

#### **Idea 3: Messaging and chatting application**

Messaging and chatting applications are widely used by everyone in daily life. There are many messaging and chatting applications that are available and can be downloaded for free, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Line, WeChat, and FB Messenger. Those applications can be utilized for language learning activities with a proper learning design for teaching listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabularies. Some ideas to utilize the applications such as:



1. Sharing materials (text, audio, or video) through messaging applications and letting the students analyze and give opinions.
2. Giving and collecting assignments (text, audio, or video) through messaging applications.
3. Having conversations in group chat (texting, calls, or video calls).
4. Doing games where students need to take turn in sending text or voice messages.

MALL using messaging applications has already been proven to be useful in improving students' English proficiency (Shi et al., 2017). In addition, messaging applications usually provide simple operations and enhance students' learning opportunities outside the class (Nuraeni & Nurmalia, 2020). Students also agree that messaging application learning based are effective to be implemented in language class (Barus & Simanjuntak, 2020).

**Idea 4:** Social media engagement

There are growing interests in using social media to facilitate language learning activities (Barrot, 2021). As most of social media users are millennials and gen Z, language teachers will eventually design learning activities with social media engagement. Some ideas in social media engagement at language learning are:

1. Giving assignments that have to be uploaded to social media (text, picture, or video).
2. Having interactions (messaging, chatting, commenting, etc) in social media.
3. React to somebody's post in social media.

In fact, social media is very popular nowadays because people can interact with each other anywhere and anytime. It is also connected globally that students can interact with people from overseas. Besides, there are also many social media accounts that are dedicated to language learning which can help students to learn a language. Considering there are so many potentials in learning a language with the help of social media engagement, it may be wise for teachers and curriculum developers to design language learning activities by utilizing social media platforms.

**Idea 5:** Language learning application

Rapid development of information technology has made it easier for developers to create any application according to their needs. There are also many applications that can support language learning as well, such as dictionary, translator, language-assistant, and language courses. It is safe now to assume that students can learn much more from their mobile devices than from their language teachers.

Some ways to implementing MALL with language learning application are:

1. Dictionary app to assist students language learning inside and outside the class.
2. Comparing students' translating skills with language translator apps.
3. Let students join some language course app and discuss the results with their friends.
4. Utilizing language learning game apps in the learning activities.

One of the popular language learning apps is Duolingo which has shown positive correlation between spending time in the app and learning gains (Loewen et al., 2019). This app is free, relatively easy to use, and can be accessed by every student. Therefore, it is a good opportunity to utilize this app in the language learning process.



### Idea 6: Learning management system

Learning management system (LMS) is widely used nowadays because it is relatively easy and fully supports mobile learning activities. Some activities that can be done in LMS apps such as:

1. Giving materials (text, audio, video, link, etc.) and assignments.
2. Collecting assignments.
3. Designing learning activities.
4. Planning time management.
5. Discussing and chatting.
6. Doing tests and examinations.

Moodle is an LMS that already exists and widely used for more than a decade. The features offered are videos, discussion forums, materials, chats, and quizzes. The learning activities in LMS based Moodle are proven to be effective and can be carried out without constraints and limitations like in the face-to-face learning activities (Simanullang & Rajagukguk, 2020).

Another free and mostly used LMS app is Google Classroom. This app can be used as a fully mobile learning, or to be a supporting app for language learning which students agree that it is effective to be used (Barus & Simanjuntak, 2020). During the pandemic of Covid-19, Google Classroom became popular as the learning has to be online. Students give positive perceptions of Google Classroom implementation during Covid-19 pandemic in terms of its usefulness, ease of use, ease of learning, and satisfaction (Oktaria & Rahmayadevi, 2021).

### Potential constraints in implementing MALL

MALL might have some challenges when being implemented, especially in having gadgets and the internet to support MALL activities. Some time ago, smartphones are expensive gadget that could not be purchased by everyone, but nowadays it's relatively cheaper that many students can have one. However, just having a smartphone is not enough. Students also need to have internet access so they can follow the MALL activities. Other challenges, like Çakmak (2019) says such as privacy; mobility; ownership; and informality, also need to be considered before implementing MALL. Therefore, after considering the potential constraints and challenges in MALL, teachers or curriculum developers can design the best suitable learning activities.

### Lack of access to smartphones

Smartphones are a must today, however not all students may have access to it. Smartphones might be a lot cheaper today as Reinders (2010) says, however there are also many rural areas that could not have access to smartphones. Some students might also have limitations in how they spend their money that they prefer to buy something else than a smartphone. In this case, when not everyone in the class has access to a smartphone, MALL can not be optimally implemented.

### Lack of Internet Access

Most MALL activities need internet access, otherwise it can not work well. Therefore, internet access has to be considered in designing the learning activities. Some activities that require internet access such as sending and receiving pictures and videos, communicating through chatting applications, browsing learning materials, and streaming videos.

Lost access to the internet will limit students and teachers engagement in MALL. In this case, the teacher has to be aware of the situation and design MALL activities that require less access to the internet. For example, students do activities outside the class and collect it in the next meeting at school where internet access is available.



**Cost**

Implementing MALL can be costly or relatively cheap. As long as there are costs in using smartphones, students might hesitate. Therefore, the costs, such as internet quota, credit usage, or electricity bills, need to be considered while designing the language learning activities. There are also costs to some applications to be usable or they will have usage limitations. The costliest item in applying MALL might be smartphones. The fact that most students have their own smartphone is not true in some areas. For example, most students in cities are able to purchase smartphones while most students in rural areas are unable to. In this case, teachers need to be aware about the situations between costs and students' ability.

Teachers have to design learning activities that are relatively cheap or free so all students can be involved. In the case of internet costs, maybe a free wi-fi will solve the problems. Teachers can also provide free electricity for students to charge their mobile devices freely at learning classrooms. In fact, free wi-fi and electricity to charge mobile devices are available in many places now which can be a supportive condition to implement mobile learning.

**Practical usage**

Mobile devices, such as smartphones; tablets; and laptops, are so portable that they can be brought everywhere and practically easy to use. However, not all students and teachers can use it well because of some reasons, for example some of the senior teachers are technologically backwards. Students may also come from various family backgrounds which some of them might also be technologically backwards, thus they might have some problems when encountering MALL.

Some mobile devices and applications are not commonly used by students and teachers, thus they need more time to adapt. The problem that might arise is whether the teacher and students want to adapt or not. Therefore, designing a mobile learning activity that is practical and relatively easy to follow is an issue. The best way is to observe the situation around, students' conditions, and students' ability so that MALL can be implemented optimally.

**Privacy**

Privacy needs to be considered during the MALL implementation because mobile devices are closely related to privacy. As mobile devices are private devices, some students might be reluctant to share something from their mobile devices. For example, a picture taken from a smartphone will have detailed metadata including where the picture was taken, what device is used, what time, and who took the picture. There will also be records of activities done by the students in the form of logs, pictures, audios, and videos where some of them might share students' private sides. Therefore, privacy policy in implementing MALL has to be defined clearly before the learning is done so that students will not do any inappropriate things that may disrupt the policy.

**Teacher's workload**

Using technology in learning may increase or decrease teachers' workload depending on how well the learning activities are designed. For teachers who combine face-to-face learning with MALL, they will have extra work in designing and correlating the two different learning approaches. It will also increase teacher's workload when designing MALL activities for the first time, but with good planning and management it will decrease the teacher's workload in the end because technology exists to make people's work easier.

MALL may be done anywhere and anytime that sometimes will be an issue as well. In this case, students may ask the teacher anytime when they have problems when doing the learning activities. Therefore, teachers have to stand by and guide the students anytime as well. There may also be discussions running in the messaging app with group chat that do



not have time limitations so the students may discuss the learning activities anytime that the teachers need to observe.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are so many opportunities to develop language learning activities by utilizing smartphones. With the support of internet access, smartphones in fact have so many potentials which can be used as pedagogical tools in language learning. They are also taken everywhere by students and teachers, thus utilizing smartphones for learning is a very good idea.

MALL is popular today because mobile devices are relatively easier to use for learning a language than learning at regular English class in school. Covid-19 also proves that mobile devices really help the learning process. In fact for around two years students are learning fully online assisted by their mobile devices. The case now is whether or not the teachers want to implement MALL to enhance the English language learning.

Providing ideas of implementing MALL is hoped to help teachers to practically utilize smartphones or other mobile devices to assist students in learning a language. There will also be some limitations, challenges and constraints in implementing it. Cost, internet access, practical usage, and workload may become challenges that need to be overcome, but still MALL is a great investment in language learning and worth implementing.

Moreover, teachers need to be creative in designing the learning activities that can be engaging for students. Smartphones as their daily gadgets will work as a pedagogical tool if utilized well and will give different learning experiences to a conventional class. Learning may be fun and non-binding because students can learn anywhere and anytime. Finally, with the proper design, well-executed activities, evaluation and adaptation, MALL will surely enhance students learning activities thus getting the best result at the end of the learning process.

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