Students' perception of mobile assisted language learning on academic listening and speaking performance

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the impact of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) on improving English listening and speaking skills among Chinese postgraduate students. Focusing on the perceptions and experiences of one student preparing for the IELTS exam, the study highlights positive attitudes towards MALL and suggests its effectiveness in enhancing communicative competencies. The findings provide implications for learning strategies that could foster more efficient and productive language acquisition outcomes.

Keywords: Mobile Assisted Learning; Students' Perceptions; English Listening and Speaking; Chinese Postgraduate Student

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology, particularly the Internet, has profoundly transformed communication, work, and education. Mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, recognized for their user-friendly and robust functionalities [9], have become pivotal in educational settings. These devices allow teachers and students to access a wide array of authentic materials related to foreign countries at any time and place, enabling learning at individual paces.

Following Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as a significant educational approach impacting both educators and learners. Research has extensively covered the enhancement of the four key English skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary through mobile technologies. The adoption of mobile devices in education is often motivated by their portability, multifunctionality, superior connectivity, and user-centric design [4]. Studies such as Klimova and Polakova (2020) [7] have documented a favorable reception towards mobile applications for language learning, underscoring their practicality and convenience. This preference is echoed by Thornton and Houser (2005) [12], who noted a predilection for mobile over traditional computer use for brief educational sessions.

In contemporary China, proficiency in English is increasingly deemed crucial for those seeking international education opportunities, competitive employment, and improved social status. Yet, the mastery of effective English listening and speaking skills remains a formidable challenge, hindered by limited access to quality spoken English, insufficient practice opportunities in authentic contexts, and a reliance on traditional pedagogical method [5]. These barriers often prevent learners from achieving high competence in communicative English [2]. Addressing these issues, this study employs qualitative interviews to investigate learners' perceptions of MALL's role in enhancing English listening and speaking skills, aiming to understand its potential to overcome the educational limitations currently faced by English learners in China.

2. Literature Review

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) utilizes handheld or palmtop devices equipped with educational programs to enhance language learning and teaching, encompassing both formal and informal activities [11]. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) [8] argues that MALL, deriving from Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), offers unique benefits through its use of personal, portable devices that foster continuous and spontaneous learning across diverse settings. This adaptability has made MALL a pivotal tool in second and foreign language acquisition, aiding learners to access educational content anytime and anywhere, which modifies the traditional dynamics of teacher-student interactions and facilitates active learning both inside and outside the classroom [14].

The effectiveness of MALL in improving language skills—particularly listening and speaking—is supported by numerous studies. Some studies highlight the positive reception of mobile technologies in English speaking courses, noting that applications like LINE enhance student engagement and motivation. Similarly, Hwang and his colleagues (2006) [6], and Liu and Chu (2010) [10] demonstrate that game-based

mobile systems can significantly improve speaking skills compared to traditional learning methods. Such mobile applications not only support diverse learning styles but also encourage continual learning and interaction, crucial for language proficiency [1].

Despite these advantages, the implementation of MALL is not without challenges. Issues such as small screen sizes, unreliable internet connectivity, and distractions from calls and notifications can impede learning [7]. Moreover, the informal nature of mobile learning environments may adversely affect learning outcomes if not adequately structured [3]. Furthermore, the integration of MALL into language learning processes, especially in regions like China, is still in its nascent stages. There is a growing need to explore how mobile technologies can be effectively utilized to overcome barriers in traditional language education settings and enhance the English listening and speaking abilities of non-native speakers.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), a model that identifies four core determinants of technology acceptance and usage: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions [13]. This framework provides a robust tool for understanding the reasons behind technology adoption and assessing the likelihood of successful implementation based on user experiences.

- Performance Expectancy: This dimension explores users' beliefs about whether using MALL will enhance their language learning outcomes.

- Effort Expectancy: This aspect assesses the perceived ease of using MALL technologies during language learning activities.

- Social Influence: This factor examines how the opinions of significant others (e.g., peers, instructors) can influence learners' decisions to use MALL.

- Facilitating Conditions: This component evaluates the extent to which an adequate infrastructure supports the effective use of MALL.

These dimensions are utilized to analyze students' perceptions of mobile-assisted language learning, providing insights into both the adoption and ongoing use of MALL in enhancing English language skills.

4. Methodology

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to gather detailed insights into students' attitudes and behaviors regarding the use of mobile applications for language learning. The research focused on a single Chinese postgraduate student from the Education Department at Henan University, who had been preparing for the IELTS exam and had a background of nearly ten years in English study. The participant's prior engagement with various mobile applications for academic purposes, and a baseline performance with an average IELTS listening and speaking score of 5.5, provided a solid foundation for exploring the nuances of MALL adoption.

The interview protocol, informed by the UTAUT model, delved into several key areas: the reasons for choosing MALL, the frequency and nature of its use, selection criteria for mobile learning tools, and perceptions of its impact on language proficiency. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participant's experiences and the contextual factors influencing the use of mobile technology in language learning.

5. Data Analysis

This study employed a general inductive approach to analyze the interview data, focusing on the participant's perceptions of using Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) to enhance English listening and speaking skills. The analysis categorized responses into four key aspects, addressing two central research questions: the attitudes towards MALL and its practical utility during the learning process.

5.1 Usage and Selection

The participant identified three main reasons for using MALL technologies:

1. Physical Features: Preference for the compact and portable nature of mobile devices over bulkier alternatives like tablets or laptops, emphasizing convenience and flexibility in learning environments.

2.   Academic Needs: Utilization of MALL to supplement gaps in traditional education, particularly for practicing speaking skills not adequately covered in regular classes and to prepare for the IELTS exam.

3.   Access to Resources: Mobile applications provide a wealth of educational materials from authentic English contexts, which are crucial for immersive language learning.

The participant expressed: "I use mobile applications in language learning because, unlike computers, which are heavy and inconvenient, MALL is portable, accessible, and offers a variety of exercises and activities. It allows me to engage with real contexts of native speakers' conversations and access resources systematically categorized for easy retrieval."

Decision-making factors for choosing specific apps included recommendations from peers and educators, as well as ratings and reviews from app stores, which align with their specific learning objectives.

5.2 Frequency and Experience of Usage

The participant frequently used mobile tools in quiet settings to avoid distractions, primarily at night, to focus on listening and speaking exercises. Daily usage was kept under two hours to prevent fatigue, with the most time spent on listening activities that required intensive practice.

"I prefer using these apps during breaks or while commuting, as they allow me to efficiently utilize downtime for language practice. The design of these apps helps me focus intensely on the material, especially for complex listening passages."

5.3 Improvements and Challenges

Significant improvements were noted in the fluency of spoken English, aided by interactive features like role-play and simulation games, which enhance verbal interactions with peers and instructors. However, challenges such as the presence of advertisements, the voluntary nature of the learning process, and the cost of premium features occasionally hindered progress.

"Despite the distractions and occasional costs, these tools have fundamentally enhanced my ability to practice and improve my English, both in listening and speaking."

5.4 Perceptions of Future Implementation

The participant is optimistic about the continued use of MALL, citing its potential to significantly enhance language proficiency through tailored and flexible learning experiences.

"The versatility and resourcefulness of mobile applications make them indispensable for my ongoing language studies. They not only help improve my listening and speaking skills but also facilitate a broader acquisition of vocabulary and cultural knowledge."

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the use of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) among Chinese postgraduate students via the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Key motivations for adopting MALL included the convenience of mobile devices, their ability to supplement educational gaps, particularly in IELTS preparation, and access to extensive English resources. Participants reported enhancements in English fluency and listening skills, facilitated by interactive exercises such as role-playing, which also boosted their confidence.

Despite these benefits, challenges like unsupervised learning environments, distracting advertisements, and the costs of premium features sometimes undermined the effectiveness of MALL. Social influences from peers and educators significantly affected the choice of applications, emphasizing the need for community input in technology selection.

Effective integration of MALL requires selecting applications aligned with specific educational goals and managing the learning environment to minimize distractions. While MALL has potential in language education, realizing this potential depends on overcoming these challenges. Future research should expand on these findings to refine MALL implementation strategies, enhancing language learning outcomes.

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