

MOBILE LANGUAGE LEARNING: MORE THAN JUST “THE PLATFORM”

A commentary on Glenn Stockwell’s [Using Mobile Phones for Vocabulary Activities: Examining the Effect of the Platform](#). *Language Learning & Technology*, Vol. 14, No. 2.

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Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is attracting a great deal of attention at present (Stockwell & Sotillo, 2011). However, it is important that teacher and researcher exploitation of technological developments be guided by more than just enthusiasm. *Language Learning & Technology*’s commitment to empirical studies is admirable but, for conclusions based on empirical research to be valid, it is important to be clear about exactly what any data being gathered pertains to. In many ways, Stockwell (2010) presents a solid piece of research on the effects of the mobile phone platform on vocabulary activities; however, it could be argued that efforts made to ensure the comparability of the data gathered resulted in the data gathered having little relevance to genuine MALL activities. To some extent, this can be explained as a consequence of the speed of technological innovation in this area, but in other respects, it suggests that more care needs to be taken to develop a research framework within which the platform is not artificially separated from the learning activity. If such a framework can be developed, the scope of findings would have considerably greater validity and represent a far greater contribution to an empirical account of MALL.

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Computer assisted language learning (CALL) has been around since the early 1960s, and it has generally been technology-driven, as opposed to driving the technology (Beatty, 2003). Indeed, early CALL programs can be seen to have had their roots in the audio-lingual method, or else were often little more than alternative platforms for the delivery of what could just have easily been pen and paper activities: reviewing the first 30 years of CALL, Fox declares that “the essential conservatism and unimaginativeness of many of the programs is depressing” (as cited in *ibid.*, p. 2). However, with the rise of the Internet, CALL began to step out of the language lab and into the world. Hence, recent research on CALL has often focused on issues of learner autonomy, and in particular, distance-learning: Internet-enabled CALL is seen as an opportunity to engage language learners in communicative tasks outside the classroom. In the last decade, CALL literature has begun to address the potentials of MALL: “Mobile-assisted language learning,” or “M-learning” (Godwin-Jones, 2008; 2011). MALL has opened new directions in CALL, as the flexibility offered to users has the potential to greatly exceed that of non-mobile CALL. However, the pace of technological innovation can have the effect of making research into MALL appear outdated as technology seems to be developing faster than researchers can publish.

An admirable piece of empirical research into the effects of the mobile phone platform on vocabulary acquisition is provided by Stockwell (2010); however, having undertaken a three-year research program, starting in 2007, many of his findings seem to have already become obsolete. Stockwell concludes that “activities may take longer on mobile phones compared with computers” (p. 107). However, it seems clear from his description of the MALL environment his participants interfaced with that it was pre-SmartPhone, which is hardly surprising when one considers the iPhone platform was only released in 2007, and Android in 2008. Issues he identified as possible problems included Internet access costs, scrolling time, and small screens and keypads. Thus, though it is possible that some students used Smartphones with touch screen technology, it appears the majority were using pre-SmartPhone mobile phone technology. Consequently, as Martinez and Schmitt (2010) point out, many of the issues leading to his conclusions may have already been resolved by technological innovation, assuming learners are

wealthy enough to be using Wi-Fi enabled, touch screen, application integrated mobile phone technology. Indeed, Stockwell and Sotillo (2011) identify 2009—the year in which Stockwell’s (2010) study ceased collecting data—as the beginning of a new MALL research area, apps for language learning. Thus, given the pace at which the technologies concerned are developing, the issue of technology’s pace of change would appear to be an issue which longitudinal research designs cannot avoid. Which is to say, this is not a criticism of Stockwell’s 2010 research.

Looking at Stockwell’s (2010) research design from another angle, however, an ungenerous observer might conclude that he was guilty to some extent of the “conservatism and unimaginativeness” Fox complained of back in 1991. Describing the vocabulary activity system he used to collect the data he says: “Each lesson included 13–17 vocabulary items which were selected from the commercially produced textbook” (p. 100). As mentioned above, Stockwell was no doubt constrained by the technology commonly available at the beginning of the study, and probably also by the context his study was conducted in: the need to integrate the MALL activity with the participants’ expectations and course of study. However, his description of the learning activity students engaged with makes it sound as if it would have been just as suitable for pen and paper completion as CALL or MALL. This may have been because it was a format that he felt could be realized through a web browser interface, and his decision to employ a browser-based interface and stick with it across all three years of his study would appear to be for sound methodological reasons: to maintain comparability between the three cohorts he collected data from. However, though he does indicate that he found it necessary to simplify some facets of the mobile interface to accommodate the technological limitations of the platform, it appears the approach adopted was to realize the activity on both computer and mobile platforms as similarly as possible, presumably to increase comparability. However, to some extent, this would seem to somewhat invalidate his findings *vis-à-vis* his declared aim: to investigate the effects of the platform.

Stockwell (2010) appears to assume that decisions about the design of the learning software can be separated from the platform they will be delivered on, but approaching the issue like this could be seen as predetermining the outcome. For example, Web pages are convenient to read on computers, but their layout and design would make little sense if transposed to the traditional print medium. Thus, the study’s conclusions seem to apply most properly to the effects of completing pen and paper type vocabulary activities on mobile phones and computers. However, it is not clear that this says much about the potential of the MALL platform to engage learners in vocabulary activities. Provide a learner with a pen and paper type activity, and ask them if they would like to complete it with pen and paper, through CALL or through MALL, and they may well choose CALL, or even perhaps pen and paper, but this seems to be, to some extent, missing the point of MALL.

Given recent technological advances, MALL activities should be app based, exploiting touch screen technology and designed to be used in the situations MALL has opened up (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Regarding this last point, Stockwell (2010) himself points out that a possible confound in the study is the effect of environment on MALL use. He hypothesizes that some of his participants may have utilized the mobile phone activities in preference to computer activities to take advantage of “dead time,” for example, when commuting. He suggests that such an environment may have had an effect on users, an effect which would also be present for computer users if their computers were in such an environment. He also quite correctly identifies what is probably the core attraction of MALL: the potential to turn such “dead time” into useful study time. However, his research design investigates using this time for learning activities which were not designed for this kind of environment or this kind of platform. There is of course some value in exploring the effects of completing pen and paper type activities on your phone, possibly even on a crowded train, but it is also possible to imagine other types of MALL-enabled activities designed explicitly to be conducive to study in just these kinds of unconventional study situations. Stockwell’s research is enlightening in many respects, but in some ways, the empirical findings report on the least justifiable exploitation of MALL’s potential. It is not just the rapid pace of

technological development which limits the utility of Stockwell's findings; they are also limited in terms of their scope. Stockwell's study answers questions regarding the potential of MALL to compete with CALL as a substitute for a textbook well, but a more important question remains: does MALL have the potential to supplement our existing language learning resources with something else, something designed to exploit the "dead spaces" which MALL has brought to life and, if so, what effect would the platform have then?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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