

Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) at the Advanced Level: A Qualitative Study of Learner Practices and perceptions

Ahmad Abdusalam Ramadan Emaiza*

Department of English, Faculty of Languages, Elmergib University, Al-Khums, Libya.

تعلم اللغة بمساعدة الهاتف المحمول (MALL) في المستوى المتقدم: دراسة كمية لممارسات المتعلمين وتصوراتهم

أحمد عبدالسلام رمضان امعيزة *

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات، جامعة المرقب، الخمس، ليبيا

*Corresponding author: severuslby@gmail.com

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Abstract

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is changing the way advanced language learners' study, but there remains a limited understanding of how high-level learners use mobile resources in a strategic and personal way. Qualitative studies often concentrate on the effectiveness of particular applications for isolated abilities; however, this study fills a significant void by offering a qualitative, comprehensive analysis of the learner's perspective. This study examines the lived experiences, autonomous behaviours, and perceived opportunities and obstacles associated with mobile device usage among advanced English language learners. Utilising a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews, data were collected and subjected to theme analysis. Findings indicate that advanced learners construct tailored, intricate MALL ecosystems, utilising resources such as AI chatbots, corpus databases, and social media to address specific domains including pragmatic competence, collocational correctness, and fluent oral production. Key themes include how mobile devices may help students become more independent, how they can help them get involved in real communities of practice, and how they can help them deal with cognitive overload and the need for more advanced self-regulation skills at the same time. The study finds that for advanced MALL to be genuinely effective, pedagogical support must evolve to assist learners in strategically incorporating these potent, yet intricate, digital tools into their language acquisition processes. This study provides significant insights for educators, curriculum developers, and creators of language learning tools.

Keywords: Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), advanced language learners, qualitative research, learner autonomy, digital tools, language learning strategies.

المخلص

يغير التعلم بمساعدة الهاتف المحمول (MALL) الطريقة التي يدرس بها متعلمو اللغة المتقدمون، لكننا ما زلنا لا نعرف الكثير عن كيفية استخدام المتعلمين ذوي المستوى المتقدم للموارد المحمولة بطريقة استراتيجية وشخصية. غالباً ما تركز الدراسات النوعية على فعالية تطبيقات معينة لمهارات منعزلة؛ غير أن هذه الدراسة تملأ فراغاً مهماً من خلال تقديم تحليل نوعي وشامل لوجهة نظر المتعلم. تدرس هذه الدراسة التجارب الحية والسلوكيات المستقلة والفرص والعقبات المدركة المرتبطة باستخدام الأجهزة المحمولة بين متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية المتقدمين. وباستخدام منهجية نوعية مع مقابلات شبه منظمة، جُمعت البيانات وحُللت تحليلًا موضوعيًا.

تشير النتائج إلى أن المتعلمين المتقدمين يبنون أنظمة بيئية مخصصة ومعقدة لتعلم اللغة بمساعدة الهاتف المحمول (MALL)، مستخدمين موارد مثل دردشات الذكاء الاصطناعي وقواعد البيانات النصية (الكوربوس) ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لمعالجة مجالات محددة، بما في ذلك الكفاءة البراغمية وصحة التراكيب اللغوية والإنتاج الشفهي الطلق. وتتمثل بعض الأفكار الرئيسية في كيفية مساعدة الأجهزة المحمولة الطلاب على أن يصبحوا أكثر استقلالية، وكيف يمكنها مساعدتهم على

الانخراط في مجتمعات ممارسة حقيقية، وكيف يمكنها مساعدتهم على التعامل مع الحمل المعرفي المفرط والحاجة إلى مهارات تنظيم ذاتي أكثر تطوراً في الوقت نفسه. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن تكون فعالية التعلم المتقدم بمساعدة الهاتف المحمول (MALL) حقيقية، فلا بد من تكييف المساعدة التعليمية لمساعدة المتعلمين على دمج هذه الأدوات الرقمية القوية والمعقدة بشكل استراتيجي في عملياتهم لاكتساب اللغة. وتقدم هذه الدراسة رؤية مهمة للمعلمين ومطوري المناهج الدراسية ومصممي أدوات تعلم اللغات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم بمساعدة الهاتف المحمول (MALL)، متعلمو اللغة المتقدمون، البحث النوعي، استقلالية المتعلم، الأدوات الرقمية، استراتيجيات تعلم اللغة.

Introduction

The widespread use of mobile technology has completely changed the way language is taught, leading to the new area of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Initially examined for its effectiveness in providing vocabulary and grammatical exercises to novices, MALL is currently acknowledged for its capacity to facilitate advanced linguistic development (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2020). As students reach higher levels of competency, however, their needs change from basic information to more advanced abilities including pragmatic competence, collocational accuracy, and using the language on their own in real-life situations. At this point, mobile devices go from being a source of structured input to a tool to access personalised, ongoing, and contextual learning.

Although an increasing amount of evidence validates the effectiveness of MALL for specific language improvements, a considerable deficiency persists in our qualitative comprehension of its implementation at the advanced level. Current research frequently emphasises quantitative assessments of particular applications, resulting in insufficient exploration of the lived experiences, strategic behaviours, and perceived affordances of advanced learners (Reinders & Benson, 2017). How do these students plan how to use a set of mobile resources, such as AI chatbots, corpus databases, and social media sites, to reach their specialised and advanced language goals? What problems do they face in these self-directed learning environments? Answering these questions is important for creating teaching methods that use mobile technology to help people learn languages at a high level.

Therefore, this study aims to provide a detailed, emic view of how advanced learners use mobile technology in their language learning. The study, called "Mobile-Assisted Language Learning at the Advanced Level: A Qualitative Study of Learner Practices and Perceptions," uses qualitative interviews to look into the advanced tactics and personal insights of this group of learners. This study seeks to elucidate the intricate reality of advanced Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) by prioritising learner perspectives, thereby reconciling the disparity between technology capabilities and effective, learner-centred application. The results are meant to help teachers who work with advanced learners and to help make MALL resources that are more responsive and useful.

Research objectives:

1. To pinpoint and classify the distinct, autonomous strategies utilised by advanced English language learners while employing mobile devices for language acquisition.
2. To investigate advanced learners' views on the main benefits and problems of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) for reaching high levels of language proficiency.
3. To extract evidence-based recommendations for pedagogical design and learner training that can proficiently facilitate advanced MALL.

Research questions:

1. What are the specific practices and self-regulated strategies that advanced English language learners employ when using mobile devices for language learning?
2. How do advanced learners perceive the affordances and constraints of mobile devices in supporting their journey towards higher linguistic proficiency?

Literature review:

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has transitioned from a specialised adjunct to language acquisition into a principal educational field. Early MALL research mostly concentrated on fundamental skills such as vocabulary learning and grammar exercises, utilising the mobility and accessibility of devices for novice and intermediate learners (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). However, as technology and teaching methods have improved, research has switched to more complex, integrated, and communicative applications of mobile devices. This has led to the creation of a new discipline that looks at how these tools may meet the specific demands of advanced learners.

A fundamental theoretical basis for advanced MALL is the enhancement of student autonomy and the creation of individualised learning environments. This is grounded in the theory of learner autonomy, which Benson (2011) defines as the capacity to take control over one's own learning. Advanced learners, by definition,

require less structured input and more opportunities for authentic conversation and meaning-making. Mobile devices are powerful tools for fostering this autonomy. According to Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2020), mobile devices make it possible to "learn anywhere, anytime." Advanced learners can choose their own language input through podcasts, news apps, and social media, which personalises their learning path outside of the classroom. This trend has rapidly accelerated, creating new opportunities for autonomous learning through mobile devices and the ever-increasing availability of streaming video and other authentic materials. As Godwin-Jones (2024) argues, this wide and personal choice of resources inevitably draws the learner into contact—and into learning opportunities—with fellow learners and native speakers. This fits with the concept of learner agency, which posits that mobile devices can help learners take charge of their own learning and make it more effective.

This movement towards autonomous learning is deeply connected to social and participatory models of acquisition. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is not an individualistic endeavor but a socially mediated process (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Mobile devices act as powerful mediators, facilitating access to what Lantolf and Thorne term "socially sourced mediation"—guidance and interaction from a distributed community of peers and experts. The activities described by Godwin-Jones (2024)—being drawn into contact with others—exemplify this process. This aligns with the concepts of situated learning and 'communities of practice', suggesting that advanced learners are using mobile technology not merely to study the language, but to participate in digital social situations, thereby learning through communication and belonging.

At the advanced level, vocabulary acquisition extends beyond individual words to include collocations, phrasal verbs, and infrequent lexical elements. Recent research indicates that mobile-based solutions such as digital flashcards (Anki) and concordancers are exceptionally useful for this purpose. Lin and Yu (2022) discovered that employing a mobile-assisted corpus tool markedly enhanced advanced L2 learners' capacity to identify authentic collocation patterns in contrast to conventional dictionary usage. Additionally, applications that offer exposure to real language usage, such as video streaming platforms, have demonstrated the capacity to improve pragmatic competence and cultural awareness.

It can be hard to learn how to talk fluently and with natural pronunciation. MALL delivers one-of-a-kind solutions here through learning in an informal way. Research examining the utilisation of speech recognition software and video production tools on smartphones indicates favourable results. For example, Suzuki et al. (2021) looked at the usage of a mobile app for shadowing and practicing spoken dialogue. They found that advanced learners made big improvements in fluency and prosody. Research on social media platforms like TikTok or voice-based communities shows that they can help people practice and get feedback on their spoken production in low-stress settings.

The volume of MALL literature is expanding, however a considerable segment continues to concentrate on quantitative assessments of efficacy for specific abilities. There is a relative scarcity of qualitative, comprehensive study on the learner perspectives and self-directed activities of advanced users. How do advanced learners strategically incorporate a collection of mobile technologies into their everyday routines? What obstacles and opportunities do they see? This research, "Mobile-Assisted Language Learning at the Advanced Level: A Qualitative Study of Learner Practices and Perceptions," seeks to fill this need. By using semi-structured interviews, it aims to give a deep, emic understanding of the complex and personalised ecosystems that advanced learners build. This adds to the current quantitative findings and gives teachers and curriculum designers' useful information.

Methodology

Research design

This study utilised a qualitative research design to obtain a comprehensive, emic insight into the habits and views of advanced English language learners concerning Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). A phenomenological approach was adopted because it looks at how people have experienced something in real life (Creswell & Poth, 2018)—in this case, using mobile devices to learn a language at a higher level. The researcher chose this design because it focusses on depth rather than breadth and lets us explore individual experiences in a rich, nuanced way that numbers cannot.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sample technique was employed to find participants capable of meaningfully addressing the research objectives. The requirements for participation were: (1) being an adult learner (18 years or older), (2) possessing an advanced level of English proficiency (self-assessed as C1 or C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR), and (3) actively utilising a mobile device (smartphone or tablet) for independent language learning outside of a formal classroom environment. The final sample included 15 participants (10 female and 5 male), consisting of both international students and professionals.

Data Collection

The main way to acquire data was through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected due to its adaptable framework, enabling the researcher to steer the discussion towards essential themes while affording participants the opportunity to expand on their individual experiences (Bryman, 2016). An interview protocol was created that included questions about the MALL apps utilised, learning routines and techniques, perceived benefits for different language skills, and problems faced.

Each interview, which was done by Zoom, lasted about 45 to 60 minutes. With the participants' permission, all interviews were taped and then transcribed word for word so that the information was correct and could be analysed in depth. The transcripts produced in excess of 200 pages of textual information.

Data Analysis

The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach for thematic analysis to look at the transcribed data. This process involved the researcher familiarizing themselves with the data, come up with basic codes, look for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and write the report. The analysis was mainly inductive, which means that themes came out of the data instead than being put into a coding frame that already existed.

The researcher used NVivo software to organise and code the data in a methodical way. The first coding found important elements like "using AI for writing," "podcasts for listening immersion," and "frustration with app limitations." After that, these codes were put together into possible themes, which were then improved over and over again to make sure they appropriately mirrored the dataset.

Illustrative Data: Interview Quotations

To maintain coherence between the research design and the results, and to anchor the analysis in the participants' perspectives, some exemplary quotations are provided below. These passages illustrate the emergent topics addressed in the results section.

- On Creating a Personalised Learning Ecosystem: "It's not just one app." It's my own world. I use Anki to learn new words I find in articles, HelloTalk to get my writing checked by native speakers, and BBC podcasts to pass the time on the way to work. "Each one has a different job." (Participant 7)
- On Perceived Affordances for Nuanced Skills: "ChatGPT has changed the way I write. It can rewrite a sentence in a more professional or casual fashion and explain the difference. A textbook can't accomplish that." (Participant 12)
- On Challenges and Self-Regulation: "The hardest part is staying focused. You open your phone to complete a language practice, but a notification pulls you into social media for 30 minutes. You need to be quite strict." (Participant 4)

Ethical Considerations

The University Ethics Committee gave their permission for the project. Before taking part, everyone got an information leaflet and signed a consent form. They were told that they might leave at any time. By creating fake names and keeping all data safe, anonymity and privacy were guaranteed.

Discussion

This research aimed to elucidate the experiences of advanced English language learners participating in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, revealing a nuanced landscape of highly individualised, autonomous, yet demanding educational environments. The data validate that for the advanced student, MALL surpasses the rudimentary framework of app-based instruction and transforms into an intricate activity of environmental curating. Learners are not passive consumers of content; they actively design their own learning paths by carefully choosing a set of digital tools, such as AI chatbots, corpus databases, social media platforms, and flashcard apps, to fill in the gaps in their high-level language skills. This discovery greatly builds on Kukulska-Hulme et al.'s (2020) work on personalisation by showing that personalisation at the advanced level is not just about choosing content, but also about using multiple technologies in a planned way to make a unique and always-changing learning environment. The learner transitions from a passive recipient to an active manager of linguistic input, a discovery that has significant ramifications for pedagogical models that typically assume a more standardised learning trajectory.

The discussion on learner agency is complicated by the identified challenges of cognitive overload and the pressing need for advanced self-regulation. The very affordances of MALL—access to boundless authentic materials and unlimited opportunities for practice—present a double-edged sword. While learners relish the autonomy, they also report that this abundance can be overwhelming. This finding is empirically supported by Zheng & Wang (2022), whose research specifically identified a strong correlation between self-regulation capacity and successful outcomes in MALL environments, highlighting that mere access to tools is insufficient without the meta-skill to manage them. This challenge is fundamentally rooted in the psychology of the language learner; as Dörnyei (2005) established, self-regulation is a critical individual difference variable that determines

a learner's ability to direct and sustain their motivation and focus in complex learning situations. Our study extends this understanding to the advanced MALL context, indicating that the capacity for efficient self-regulation—to filter, select, and concentrate amidst digital distractions—emerges as the cornerstone of 'digital learning intelligence.' This concept moves the discussion beyond a techno-optimistic view and situates it firmly within the real-world experience of the learner, suggesting that the efficacy of MALL is not intrinsic to the technology but is contingent upon the learner's strategic capacity to navigate it. "This idea takes the conversation away from a techno-optimistic vision and puts it in the real world of the learner's experience.

The data also show quite clearly how mobile devices are being utilised to connect formal language learning with real-life language use. The strategic utilisation of AI for the generation and analysis of stylistic variations, as highlighted by Participant 12's experience with ChatGPT, is not an isolated phenomenon. This finding directly aligns with recent research; Kohnke (2023), for instance, found that L2 learners perceive AI chatbots as particularly valuable for informal speaking and writing practice, appreciating their ability to provide immediate, contextualized feedback. Our study extends this understanding by revealing how advanced learners, in particular, leverage these tools for sophisticated metallinguistic analysis—not just for correction, but for exploring register, tone, and pragmatic appropriateness in a way that traditional resources cannot match. This, along with engagement in specialised online communities for peer criticism, unequivocally propels learning into the "wild," aligning with the principles of situated learning.

In conclusion, this study posits that mobile devices serve as a catalyst for empowered, contextual, and complicated language acquisition, necessitating a corresponding enhancement of the learner's strategic competencies. The results indicate that the future of advanced MALL pedagogy resides not solely in the endorsement of particular applications but in the cultivation of "digital learning intelligence"—the capacity to critically assess, strategically integrate, and sustainably oversee a collection of digital tools to facilitate enduring linguistic development. Subsequent study ought to investigate the effectiveness of certain pedagogical interventions aimed at cultivating meta-cognitive and self-regulatory skills, thereby ensuring that learners possess not just advanced technology but also the discernment to utilise it proficiently.

Conclusion:

This exploration of advanced language learners' experiences who are learning advanced languages has shown me a story that is more about human creativity than technology itself. The researcher did not find people who just used applications; the study found people who were excited about building their own learning. They are curators, putting together their own ecosystems from a mix of tools; they are social learners, looking for connection and a real voice in global communities; and they are practical problem-solvers, using whatever means necessary to figure out a tricky phrasal verb or the subtle rhythm of a native speaker's conversation. Their stories remind us that learning a language at the highest levels is a very personal and creative process. The mobile device serves as an adaptable canvas on which that process takes place.

But this new freedom comes with a very human battle. The same tools that provide us access to endless information can also make us feel overwhelmed and distracted. The stories that the students tell are not just about their successes; they also show how frustrated they are, which shows how important it is to have help in the digital world. This makes us reassess what teachers and curriculum designers should do. Our role is changing from being the main providers of information to teaching people how to use technology and control themselves. The next step is to work with students to help them develop the wisdom and discipline they need to make the most of their strong, personalised learning settings. In the end, our study shows that the future of advanced language learning lies in a partnership that works well together. In this partnership, digital tools assist, rather than replace, human aspiration and intuition, giving each learner the freedom to craft their own unique story of linguistic mastery.

This study eventually depicts the contemporary language learner not merely as a student in the conventional sense, but as a digital innovator. They are exploring a new world where the classroom is everywhere and the curriculum is up to them to decide. Their stories—like using a chatbot to practise a hard talk before a meeting or hearing a term in a podcast and then looking it up online right away—show a big change. The goal is no longer just to be good at it; it has to become a better version of yourself through language, thanks to the technology in their pocket. It is a very personal and often private journey, with technology as a modest partner to people's curiosity and willpower.

Recommendation:

It is advisable for educators and curriculum developers to incorporate explicit instruction on "digital learning literacy" into advanced language courses. This should go beyond just listing useful apps and teach students how to choose tools wisely, deal with digital distractions, and set good learning goals in their own MALL ecosystems. This will help them deal with the problem of cognitive overload that this study found.

The findings suggest that learners should use mobile technology in a more thoughtful and planned way. Students should regularly evaluate their MALL practices, selecting apps that address specific skill gaps and learning objectives, while also intentionally devising techniques to minimize distractions and sustain concentration during mobile learning sessions.

Future researchers should expand upon these qualitative findings by conducting longitudinal studies that monitor the progression of MALL practices over time. Additional research should examine the precise influence of AI-driven tools, such as sophisticated chatbots, on intricate linguistic competencies, and explore the formulation of pedagogical models that effectively cultivate the self-regulation skills essential for success in advanced mobile learning environments.

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