The Acceptance of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) among Post Graduate ESL Students in UKM

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Abstract

Mobile and handheld devices are viewed as potentially significant aids to language learning. To explore the extent of acceptance of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) among graduate students in Malaysia, a questionnaire based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) was administered to 25 ESL Malaysian postgraduates at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The results show a positive response to MALL as a convenient, practical and easy way of assisting ESL learners in enhancing their ESL learning. This evidence of acceptance has implications for educators and curriculum designers to discover ways of exploiting the mobile phone for independent and interactive ESL learning outside the classroom.

Keywords: ESL; MALL; tertiary; independent; learning

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, rapid changes in the learning environment have taken places that are attributed to the rapid developments in information and communication technology (ICT). The use of technology in education in general and on ESL teaching and learning in particular is impacting educators and scholars as the number of educational institutions adopting these new technologies in the traditional classroom environment is increasing.

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Although previous research has addressed several challenges in adopting e-learning in higher education and in the ESL classroom, it has also identified many advantages of such technology-based instruction. Mobile learning (M-learning), namely any form of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies (Shield & Kukulsca, 2008), is recognised as an interactive type of technology-based learning in which learners are actively involved in interesting and useful learning activities by interacting and collaborating via a mobile device like a cell phone or a personal digital assistant (PDA).

One of the major reasons behind these increasing applications of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), namely, an approach to language learning that is assisted or enhanced through the use of a handheld mobile device (Shield & Kukulsca, 2008), is that mobile phones are recognised as useful mini-computers that fit in a student’s pocket, and that are portable technological devices which are almost always switched on (Prensky, 2005).

Recently, the emergence of the third generation (3G) mobile services has the potential of becoming a widely used effective learning tool, and of making M-learning the next wave of any learning environment (Hsu et al., 2006). The fact that there have been many studies regularly conducted on the applications of mobile phones in L2 learning and teaching in different contexts of the world in recent years reflects the enthusiasm generally felt about the potential of mobile devices for language learning environments (Stockwell, 2008).

In the Malaysian context, the delivery of education has been dynamically transformed with the introduction of new technologies since 1997 through the Smart School pilot project. This was partly to complement current initiatives by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to enhance the English proficiency of students. The Malaysian government has spent millions of Malaysian Ringgit on professional development to produce highly-skilled English Language teachers, as well as on the application of ICT, to motivate greater interest in and to improve the learning of English among Malaysian students. Although the use of mobile phones for learning is regarded as a new idea, it is predicted that mobile phones, particularly smart phones, would be introduced in formal education in Malaysia anytime between 2016 to 2020 (Siraj & Saleh, 2003). The numbers seem to support this prediction: the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) 2008 survey reports that the main users of the mobile phone were those between 20 to 49 years (Supyan et al. 2012), and the number is rising, along with improved ease of access to and sharing of information.

This research addresses the challenges faced by Malaysian university students majoring in English as a second language (ESL). University entrants are expected to have an adequate proficiency in English to enable them to function in their academic activities (Siti Hamin and Mohd Mustafa, 2010). However, a body of empirical research involving Malaysian ESL learners has revealed that most students, including those enrolled in teacher education institutes and universities, still face basic problems in using English, particularly in writing (Siti Hamin and Mohd Mustafa, 2010; Surina and Kamaruzaman, 2009) even after 11 years of learning English in schools. One attempt at managing this problem is to resort to the use of technology or devices which have proven effective elsewhere in improving language learning (Librero et al., 2007), especially if such devices could provide learners with increased opportunities for learning English outside the formal physical contexts of learning. The mobile phone seems to be the most appropriate gadget to experiment with. This study is confined to ascertaining Malaysian graduate students’ willingness to use mobile phones as a means of learning English.

2. Theoretical framework and review of research

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the main model relevant to the current study, has its origin in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Davis 1989), the bases of which are the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours of individuals (Sandberg & Wahlberg, 2007). A person’s performance of a specified task is determined by his or her behavioural intention (BI) to perform the behaviour, and BI is jointly determined by the person’s attitude (A) (Moss et al., 2010). Johnson (2005) illustrates the relationship between these constructs and the user’s A thus: external variables such as age, gender, education, experience of using technologies, etc. may affect a person’s perceived ease of use (PEoU) and perceived usefulness (PU); and the person’s PEoU and PU
predict his/her A toward using technology; the person’s A predicts the BI to use technology; and finally, the BI predicts the actual use of that technology.

TAM has been widely adopted and investigated by many researchers in diverse applications including web-based information (van der Heijden, 2003), internet banking (Wang et al., 2003) and electronic commerce (Henderson and Divett, 2003). Previous research demonstrates that the integration of TAM in technology-based research is widely accepted as an effective and useful model. In the field of education, Teo et al. (2008) point out that the application of TAM is still limited. Lu et al.(2003) have applied this model in their studies to investigate the application of e-learning, webs, and other Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programmes in learning and teaching ESL with the aim to further understand teachers’ and learners’ acceptance and attitudes to such particular applications of CALL. However, the M-learning technology is perceived as a novel area of research, and it is worth examining using the TAM model.

TAM comprises six constructs namely external variables, PU, PEoU, A, BI and actual usage of the system. PU, refers to the person’s perception that adopting a new technology will result in enhancing her/his performance (Davis, 1993), while PEoU refers to how learners perceive M-learning as easy and free from difficulties. The implication of these constructs to this research context is that it is important to examine the learners’ perceptions of using M-learning in improving their English learning.

3. Methodology

Twenty-five English Language Studies (ELS) graduate students (22 females and 3 males) volunteered for this study. This particular population was selected mainly for practical reasons of accessibility. Participants’ attitudes towards the use of mobile phones in ESL learning were explored via a questionnaire adapted from Clark et al. (2007), who used it to investigate learners’ level of acceptance of and attitudes towards CALL and podcasting in various aspects of learning. A pilot test confirmed the reliability and validity of each measurement. The similarity between the scope of this research to those studies on CALL makes the questionnaire an appropriate instrument to be adapted for use in this research; it merely required replacing CALL with MALL for every section and item. The subjects answered five questions concerning Perceived usefulness of MALL (PU) and four other questions regarding their attitude towards MALL.

Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 5 (“strongly agree”) to 1 (“strongly disagree”). The data were analysed using the SPSS version 12. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis through the overall Mean Score (M) of each construct as previously mentioned were measured under three different ranking values (High-level: M= 3.5 or above, Medium-level: M= 2.5 – 3.4 & Low-level: M =2.4 or below) which were adapted from previous research investigating various aspects of learners’ perceptions (see Mokhtari & Sheorey 2002; Amer et al. 2010; Li 2010; Madhumathi & Ghosh 2012).

4. Findings

Participants’ acceptance of mall

Overall, the results of the descriptive statistical analysis reported high levels of PEoU (M= 3.68), PU (M= 3.40) and BI (M= 3.13). However, the results of their level of the actual usage of MALL in English learning showed only a medium level of this construct (M= 2.93), falling within the medium ranking value (M= 2.5 – 3.4). These results indicate that while the Malaysian ESL postgraduates perceived the effectiveness of MALL in enhancing their English in terms of PEoU, PU and BI, they did not display a high level of actual use of mobile devices for English learning. However, their high levels of the three relevant constructs reflected their positive perception of the role of MALL.

The findings for each of the three constructs and the actual use of MALL are firstly, PEoU of MALL in all six (6) aspects of this construct had M values above 3.5. The first, PEoU in general was high (M=4.40). This reflects participants’ technology-oriented characteristic of learners today, especially in Malaysia where
technologies are increasingly embraced by most people in general, and students in particular. This was followed by the next five constructs, their perceptions of the ease of using mobile phones in English learning (M=3.88) and in accessing information needed for English learning (M=3.80); how they made English learning easy (M=3.70) and enabled the execution of different activities in English learning (M=3.24); and, finally, their perceptions of the ease of carrying out various activities in English learning through mobile phones (M=3.8)

Secondly, the M scores for each aspect of their PU show that the participants perceived using mobile phones as useful for learning English, particularly in terms of accessing the information they want in English, communicating with friends and lecturers in English, and using it anytime and anywhere they wanted. However, the M scores of each aspect of their PU of mobile phones revealed various degrees. The highest M score was for communicating with friends and lecturers in English (M=3.60), followed by for its ability to be used anytime and anywhere (M=3.36), and finally, for its usefulness in accessing needed information in English (M=3.24).

While learning English through mobile phones can be achieved anytime and anywhere through saved songs, audio, videos, games and other programmes that do not require the Internet, accessing information through mobile phones requires Internet access which sometimes cannot be realized as useful when there is no access to the net.

Thirdly, Participants’ responses to BI to use MALL in all nine aspects were high. The nine aspects included using: (1) laptop, (2) iPods and MP3 players, (3) iPads, (4) podcasts and vodcasts, (5) mobile phones, (6) Short Message Service (SMS), (7) voice-messaging, (8) cameras, and (9) video-recording. Mobile phones were preferred over MP3 players and iPods for listening; and were also preferred over laptop and the iPad for learning English.

The participants’ levels of BI to use MALL in English learning were high as reflected by the M values of these four aspects: (1) using laptop for enhancing their English, (2) using Short Message Service (SMS), voice-messaging, cameras and video-recording, (3) using iPads to learn English and (4) using mobile phones over MP3 players and iPods. Levels of BI to use laptop for enhancing their English were the highest (M= 4.52). Obviously, laptops can be better than mobile phones in English learning especially when it comes to reading and writing academic research since their larger screens are more conducive for learners to read and write than mobile phones.

Evidence of the potential of mobile phones over other mobile devices (e.g. MP3 players, iPods, iPads, podcasts and vodcasts) is seen in the M values of the other remaining aspects of the participants’ BI to use MALL for English learning and English improvement. This includes their preference for using mobile phones over MP3 players and iPods for listening, as well as using podcasts and vodcasts to improve their English through mobile phones. The M values were categorized under the medium ranking value (Medium-level: M= 2.5 – 3.4). Although some of the latter aspects of the participants’ BI to use MALL in English learning were at the medium levels, such results did not affect the participants’ overall BI level which was considered to be high.

**Actual usage of mall (as opposed to findings on perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and behavioral intentions earlier)**

Participants’ actual usage of MALL in English learning was also measured by carrying out a descriptive analysis of the participants’ responses to four items by calculating the M value of their responses to each item. (1) using mobile phones regularly to learn English, (2) using mobile phones more often than iPads in order to learn English, (3) using mobile phones more than MP3 player for learning English and (4) using mobile phones more than laptops in order to learn English.

Using mobile phones more often than the MP3 player for learning English reported the highest (M=3.36), among other aspects of their actual usage of MALL, followed by their regular use of mobile phones to learn English (M = 3.12). However, the result showing that the participants used mobile phones more often than the iPads in order to learn English is ranked medium as the M values of these two aspects were 2.92 and 2.32 respectively. This indicates that the participants were aware of the effectiveness of other mobile devices such as
the iPads, MP3 players and the laptops in learning English. Participants’ overall actual usage of MALL for English learning was medium, which is also positive.

The analysis showed that the overall M value of their need for using MALL was high (M= 3.26). This construct was measured through five (5) items: (1) using laptops for accessing the information they need in English, (2) using iPads for accessing the information they want, (3) using mobile phones for learning English through communication with friends and lecturers, (4) using iPads for learning English through communication with friends and lecturers and (5) using only MP3 and/or MP4 players or iPods to learn English as they do not need to communicate with friends and lecturers through English.

The highest M value was scored for item (1), using laptops for accessing information, (M=4.64). The second highest M value (M=4.24) was for item (3), using mobile phones for learning English by communicating with friends and lecturers. Since the basic purpose of using mobile phones is for communication and the medium of communication among those participating learners is English, the mobile phone appears to be the most convenient and valuable language learning device to the respondents.

Items (2) and (4) on the use of iPads scored similar M values of 2.64, which were at the medium level. This implies that the iPad was not regarded as the most important device for accessing information and for communicating with friends and lecturers in English since laptops and mobile phones were just as, if not, more convenient. Similarly, the medium score for item (5), using just MP3 and/or MP4 players or iPods to learn English (minus communicating with friends and lecturers), indicates participants’ acknowledgement of the importance of practising and enhancing their English by communicating with friends and lecturers, is best achieved through mobile devices such as mobile phones and iPads.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study provide evidence of the participants’ positive perception of MALL as expressed in their scores of their PU and attitudes towards MALL, revealing significant correlations among these variables. This is an indication of the positive perception of the role of MALL in enhancing learners’ English through providing them with the opportunity to access various useful materials, to carry out different activities in English, and to communicate and interact with their friends and lecturers using English.

One implication of the high level of acceptance of MALL by the Malaysian postgraduate students for curriculum designers and lecturers is the need for rethinking and redesigning the learning materials to incorporate mobile language learning opportunities for students to exploit. This new design should certainly be of a more communicative nature, motivating the students to enjoy learning English through interacting and communicating naturally with one another, and with teachers. The fact that students are provided with mobile phones, which allows them to take part in learning activities through interaction regardless of time and place, should be taken into consideration by educators.

In addition, as the classroom context alone cannot meet the students’ needs as far as learning a language is concerned (Surina and Kamaruzaman, 2009); teachers should consider exploiting the application of mobile phones in improving their teaching. The mobile phone is an appropriate tool that allows teachers to communicate with their students more frequently outside of the classroom, hence providing the students with more opportunities for learning. Since the mobile phone can be used anytime and anywhere, it can enable teachers to discuss, correct, direct and appoint tasks to their students without having to be physically present.

References


