BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Mobile assisted language learning: CONCEPTS, contexts and challenges*

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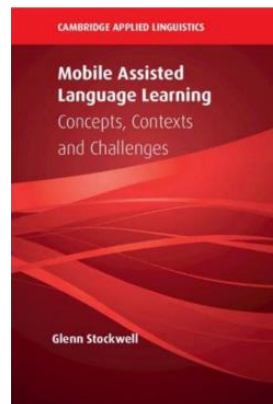
Over the past decade, the development of mobile technologies has facilitated a significant increase in their application to language education, known as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). The outbreak of COVID-19, which triggered a global switch to emergency online language learning (Tao & Gao, 2022), has stimulated an unprecedented growth of MALL research and practice. Stockwell's book can be regarded as a definitive book on the subject since this timely publication presents research on different aspects of MALL, including pedagogical design, evaluation of technology, and learner engagement (Burston, 2014; Morgana & Kukulska-Hulme, 2021). As one of the first comprehensive book-length treatments of MALL, it draws on a historic perspective to examine past and current developments, and demonstrates how MALL can provide personalized, sustainable, and equitable learning experiences for language learners. In addition, the book offers valuable guidance on the effective use of MALL for various stakeholders, including teachers, learners, researchers, and developers.

The book consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 conceptualizes MALL and presents a synthetic review of its use. Chapters 2 to 6 discuss fundamental issues related to MALL research, theory, and practice, as well as the cultivation of digital and critical digital literacies among language learners and teachers. Chapters 7 and 8 elaborate on support frameworks for learner training and teacher implementation, while Chapter 9 revisits the three main topics mentioned in the book's title: concepts, contexts, and challenges.

Chapter 1 foregrounds MALL from an ecological perspective by highlighting the coexistence of new mobile technologies' challenges and affordances. It provides an encompassing working definition of MALL as "a broad spectrum of activities and tasks that are tailored to different technologies, abilities and contexts" (p. 12). This conceptualization implies that MALL's effectiveness depends on an interactive ecology that sustains the interdependence of technology, pedagogy, and individual learners. Given the critical role that ecology plays in developing pedagogy, Stockwell argues that one should never underestimate the value of MALL ecology, erroneously assuming that technology can easily solve pedagogical problems. The chapter highlights Stockwell's concerns that learning without pedagogy is ineffective and MALL pedagogy has already "lagged behind the prospects of what it might become" (p. 5). In addition, Stockwell also reminds readers of the "digital divide," the inequitable access to mobile

devices and resources due to socio-economic disparity. Stockwell calls for language educators to address these challenges when implementing MALL as a pedagogical approach. Meanwhile, the chapter also brings to the fore Stockwell's enthusiasm about MALL's ability to address individual language learners' needs and enable them to experience highly creative and personalized learning. This potential for enhancing language learning is pivotal in sustaining educators' efforts to implement MALL pedagogy. Chapter 2 underscores the transition from affordance-based to pedagogy-based practice. While the knowledge of technical affordances is essential to learners, such affordances only motivate them for the short-term. To sustain language learners' long-term engagement, Stockwell argues that MALL needs to transcend affordance-based practice. That means that it is crucial for researchers and teachers to undertake in-depth investigations of how technological affordances can be applied in a pedagogically sound manner. Following this line of thought, the next chapter thus discusses the importance of enhancing teachers' digital literacy.

Chapter 3 elaborates on how technology use has created a significant paradigm shift in the roles of teachers and learners, and the move from conventional teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction. MALL pedagogy is grounded in the widespread assumption that language learners are active and competent technology users. In this chapter, Stockwell reminds readers that such a presumption overestimates the role of technology in MALL and argues that teachers continue to play a central role in guiding language learners during the learning process. For this reason, Stockwell presents digital literacy cultivation as an essential MALL task for language teachers and learners. The chapter also emphasizes the evolution of language teachers from mere information providers to information curators capable of synthesizing information and designing teaching to accommodate different learner needs while adapting to their capabilities. It is critical for both language teachers and learners to undertake systematic training and develop essential MALL skills so that they can take control of teaching and learning. As an example, language teachers should receive the training necessary to make informed decisions regarding the choice of technology and its application in MALL. Similarly, language learners need the training that facilitates their effective use of resources and enables them to synergize their learning in both formal and informal contexts.

Given the extent to which research and theory inform the development of MALL pedagogy, the next two chapters offer an in-depth exploration of these two fundamental issues. In particular, Chapter 4 reviews the challenges inherent in conducting MALL research, focusing on research designs and data collection methods. The chapter has an honest account of the challenges of conducting research in this area, as MALL is often conducted in naturalistic environments where it is difficult for researchers to control complex variables. It is also challenging to track and monitor language learners' usage of mobile devices in informal contexts. These difficulties notwithstanding, research exploring the attitudes of teachers and learners has generated useful insights pertaining to learners' lack of engagement and barriers that impede the adequate integration of technology in language pedagogy. In addition, this chapter documents useful data collection methods with details, which can be perceived as a set of essential guidelines for designing and conducting MALL research. In Chapter 5, Stockwell introduces various technological, cognitive, psychological, and social theories applicable to MALL. He argues that MALL overly borrows theories from other disciplines without grounding them in empirical evidence. While his call to develop novel MALL theories deserves further attention, it would be more informative to readers if the chapter could offer some strategies to guide theory building.

Chapter 6 discusses physical, psychosocial, and pedagogical issues that might undermine the effective integration of mobile devices into education. Despite the versatile functionalities of mobile devices, Stockwell duly acknowledges the challenges that language learners' multitasking presents to language teachers during MALL. He suggests that more efforts are needed to raise learners' awareness of the dangers of distractions that undermine their learning. In the chapter, he also highlights cultural misunderstandings as a concern when language learners from various backgrounds engage in MALL. Stockwell proposes such cultural misunderstandings can be resolved when teachers cultivate critical digital literacy among learners and facilitate their reflection on respecting cultural diversity. To promote

learners' critical digital literacy, teachers need to carefully integrate technology into their pedagogy after thoroughly assessing its cultural appropriateness for the learners. However, the chapter would have been more informative if it had elaborated on a few practical approaches for teachers to develop such criticality among learners.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore support frameworks for learners and teachers. In Chapter 7, Stockwell proposes a learner support framework that includes technical, strategic, and pedagogical training to sustain learner engagement in MALL. Unlike most of the training, which is ad hoc and limited to technical aspects, the support framework calls for tasks/course designs that rely on extended training periods. Technical training should take place on an ongoing basis to enhance learners' digital literacies, while strategic training should provide learning strategies that facilitate mobile language learning. In particular, the chapter offers a pedagogical training component of the framework by identifying innovative ways for learners to reflect on, evaluate, and develop appropriate learning strategies. Furthermore, the framework allows readers to apply it in different pedagogical and educational contexts. Finally, in this chapter, Stockwell gives a personal testimony about the effectiveness of the learner training support framework in supporting language learner development.

While the learner support framework has significant pedagogical implications, the teacher support framework in Chapter 8 also profoundly impacts the development of MALL pedagogy. The framework involves designing learning environments, digital artifacts, and tasks for use in MALL, thereby highlighting the dynamic interaction among these three aspects as they relate to teachers' pedagogical designs. Moreover, this framework is particularly helpful and necessary because it provides teachers with a rationale, techniques, and specific design instructions. For example, by giving examples of the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) instructional design approach, the author offers readers critical insights into how software, tasks, and evaluations are devised in five cyclical steps. Based on such explicit demonstrations, language educators can apply the support framework in a manner that is pedagogically effective and improves MALL learning outcomes.

The last chapter recaps key concepts, contexts, and challenges covered in previous chapters and draws the readers' attention to the issues of MALL sustainability, equity, and personalization. The chapter features lifelong learning as one of such key concepts considered pertinent to the sustainability of mobile learning. To achieve sustainability, Stockwell underscores the need for teachers to develop appropriate pedagogy suitable for the application of evolving mobile technology in MALL. Regarding equity-related issues, Stockwell calls for an increase in language educators' awareness of equitable learning opportunities within the context of emerging crises. When language educators are confronted with unexpected emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, they need to develop crisis management expertise. At the same time, they should implement well-considered designs to ensure learners' equitable access to learning. Finally, Stockwell focuses on the critical issue of the personalization of language education. He reiterates that the personal nature of learning ecologies empowers mobile learning. Therefore, language teachers are responsible for tailoring learning experiences to the situated needs of individual learners.

As a definitive work on MALL, the book has three commendable achievements. First, it provides a comprehensive account of MALL-related empirical studies and interdisciplinary theories. It is noteworthy that Stockwell has made an effort to highlight the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of MALL. Second, the book presents a MALL pedagogy infrastructure that integrates learner training and teacher design support frameworks. These practical frameworks constitute valuable references for language teachers, syllabus designers, and curriculum developers in different contexts. Third, the book offers a timely caution that a working mechanism is needed to deal with post-pandemic era changes and challenges. Only the well-informed integration of technology and pedagogy can sustain MALL as a successful pedagogical approach. Thus, the book calls for more scholarly discussions of how to develop a mechanism that effectively supports teachers and learners to overcome the many MALL challenges of our time.

In conclusion, the book is cutting-edge in its coverage of a broad spectrum of MALL concepts and

contexts, analyses of multiple underlying challenges, and explorations of interdisciplinary approaches. In this post-pandemic era, Stockwell envisages that MALL will continue to engage scholars from technological, sociocultural, psychological, educational, and other fields. Through their collaborative efforts, MALL will become a highly valued pedagogical approach in language education.

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