

MALL in a Challenging EFL Context: Can it Really Enhance L2 Vocabulary Learning?

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Abstract

This study seeks to extend the application MALL to a challenging EFL context—Iraq—examining its effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary learning in EFL classes. These classes are characterized by overcrowded and poorly equipped facilities, students motivated primarily by exam scores, and teaching is textbook-centred and examination-oriented. It employs a mixed methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of a self-developed application designed to enhance vocabulary learning through vocabulary learning enhancement principles (involvement, spacing, multimedia, and gamification). Over a five-week period, 131 secondary school students (aged 15-16) from two schools in Iraq participated. Within each school, students were randomly assigned to either a control group or a treatment group. However, the implementation of the experiment varied between the two schools. In the first school (S1), students were incentivized to complete tasks on the application, with progress monitored for rewards. In the second school (S2), students were only encouraged to complete the tasks without additional incentives. Statistical analysis revealed that students in the treatment group at S1 performed better than their peers in the control group. However, they were only able to retain 19 out of the 54 target vocabulary items whereas control group retained 4. In S2, no significant difference was observed between the treatment and control groups with each retaining 5 items. Follow-up interviews with teachers revealed that while the material was gamified and interactive, students still required a reward system to remain motivated. Despite this, MALL proved beneficial for teachers by enabling them to provide feedback to overcrowded classes and offering multimedia resources.

Keywords: MALL, Challenging EFL contexts, Vocabulary learning, Iraq

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Background

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has gained prominence in recent second language learning research for its potential to enhance learning by providing authentic and personalized language environments and by being less constrained by economic and technological constraints prevalent in low-income countries (Lin & Lin, 2019; Burston, 2015). The diverse applications of this trendy line of research have yielded interesting results, reporting positive outcomes in boosting the learners' linguistic knowledge and skills (Wang, 2017; Peng et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2017). Likewise, studies have demonstrated improvements in learners' motivation and engagement with learning materials (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Chen & Kessler, 2013). However, this enthusiasm for expanding this research has encountered some criticism, with some viewing it as a mere gimmick to engage students, lacking educational value or effectiveness (Stockwell, 2022; Burston, 2014). Moreover, much of the application of MALL has been limited to technologically advanced countries (Dağdelen, 2023). Amidst the scepticism about the effectiveness of MALL in leveraging language learning and the interest in its reported benefits, this study aims to address some of the criticism by implementing MALL in a challenging EFL context (Iraq) and attempting to incorporate educational principles. In this context, English is offered as a compulsory school subject and is taught in a textbook-centred and examination-oriented environment. These classes are characterized by overcrowded and poorly equipped facilities, with students primarily motivated by exam scores.

Purpose

This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of MALL outside technologically privileged contexts, specifically focusing on its impact on students' L2 vocabulary retention. Additionally, it explores the perspectives of teachers who have implemented MALL in their classes. By doing so, it aims to assess the extent to which MALL can incorporate educational principles and the feasibility of integrating it within a rigid educational system.

Design

Expanding the application of MALL into a challenging context, this study sought to establish an educational basis for a mobile application by digitizing the content of the prescribed textbook and incorporating established theories of enhancing second language vocabulary learning. These included boosting involvement (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001), offering multiple spaced encounters

(Nakata & Elgort, 2021), coupling target vocabulary with multimedia (Boers et al., 2017), and material gamification (Shortt et al., 2021). Over a five-week period, 131 secondary school students (aged 15–16) from two urban schools in Iraq voluntarily participated in the study. Within each school, students were randomly assigned to either a control group or a treatment group. However, the implementation of the experiment varied between the two schools. In the first school (S1), students were incentivized to complete tasks on the application, with progress monitored for rewards (extra scores). In the second school (S2), students were only encouraged to complete the tasks without additional incentives. Due to ethical considerations and varying access to mobile devices among students, complete shifting from the paper textbook to the application was not possible. The application's materials and tasks supplemented conventional in-class teaching for the treatment groups, while the control groups continued with conventional instruction methods.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods approach to examine and evaluate the impact of a self-developed educational mobile application on vocabulary learning in the target context. Participants took three identical tests: a pre-test one week before the experiment, an immediate post-test the day after the experiment concluded, and a delayed post-test ten days later. The tests were designed as recall tests, requiring the participants to provide Arabic translations of the items rather than choosing from multiple options, to avoid the possibility of guessing. Following the experiment, the English teachers were interviewed with open-ended questions to evaluate the experiment, its results, and the challenges that encountered them during the implementation of the mobile application.

Results

The statistical analysis (pairwise comparisons) of the three tests revealed a positive interaction between the testing times and the treatment group in S1. The participants in the treatment group performed better than their peers in the control group. In the delayed post-test, they retained 19 out of the 54 target vocabulary items whereas control group retained only 4. The average time of the application actual usage was four hours and twenty-three minutes. In S2 on the other hand, no interaction has been observed between the testing times and groups and thus no significant difference was observed between the treatment and control groups performance with each retaining 5 items only. The average time of

actual usage in S2 was twenty-four minutes. Follow-up interviews with the two teachers revealed that, despite the material being gamified and presented in interactive and fun methods, students still required a reward system (extra scores) to remain motivated to complete tasks and engage with the material. Nonetheless, MALL proved beneficial for teachers by enabling them to provide individualized feedback to overcrowded classes and offering multimedia resources and audio equipment to compensate for classroom resource deficiencies.

Discussion

While the treatment groups in both schools had access to the same material, their actual usage of the application differed significantly, resulting in divergent performance outcomes. Within this context where the culture of gaining scores and passing examinations prevails, the students' engagement with the digitized material did not show any improvement despite utilizing many of the often-praised features of MALL, including material gamifications, multimedia, interactivity, and automated feedback. An external factor, the provision of extra scores, appears to play a key role in magnifying the students' engagement and, consequently, their learning outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of considering the local culture of the students and the contextual constraints prevalent in the target context when incorporating MALL into the educational systems. Furthermore, the findings highlight the possibility that MALL can be beneficial for language teachers as well, particularly those working in challenging contexts. Teachers, who often face overwhelming workloads, can benefit from MALL by enabling them to provide feedback to their large classes, making multimedia resources available, and compensating for the lack of audio players in the classroom. However, the rigidity of curricula and the expected norms of teaching and evaluation can hinder the integration of MALL in educational systems.

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