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The Impact of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) on Vocabulary Acquisition among TESOL Learners

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Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) on vocabulary acquisition among adult TESOL learners. Sixty intermediate-level learners were divided into an experimental group using a mobile vocabulary app and a control group engaging in traditional paper-based exercises over four weeks. Results showed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in vocabulary retention, scoring 15% higher on post-tests. Additionally, learners using MALL reported higher motivation and engagement. The findings support cognitive theories such as spaced repetition and multimodal input, highlighting the pedagogical advantages of mobile technology in language learning. However, considerations regarding digital literacy and access to technology remain critical for equitable implementation. This study contributes to the growing evidence base supporting the integration of mobile technologies in TESOL and suggests directions for future research on long-term effects and broader language skills.*

Keywords: *Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Vocabulary Acquisition, TESOL Learners, Language Learning Technologies, Learner Autonomy, Motivation in Language Learning, Mobile Learning Applications.*

Introduction:

With the rapid advancement of mobile technology over the past decade, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has gained considerable attention as an innovative approach to language education. MALL refers to the use of handheld mobile devices—such as smartphones, tablets, and MP3 players—to facilitate language learning anytime and anywhere (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). This portability and constant connectivity offer learners unprecedented access to language resources outside the traditional classroom setting, allowing for more personalized, flexible, and learner-centered experiences.

In the context of TESOL, where learners often face diverse challenges such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom and varying schedules, MALL has the potential to bridge gaps in language practice and increase learner autonomy (Stockwell, 2010). Beyond mere convenience, mobile technologies support a range of pedagogical strategies, including spaced repetition, gamification, and multimedia input, which have been shown to enhance memory retention and learner engagement (Godwin-Jones, 2011).

Vocabulary acquisition is recognized as a cornerstone of language proficiency and communicative competence. A robust vocabulary enables learners to understand texts, express ideas effectively, and participate confidently in conversations. However, memorizing and retaining new vocabulary can be daunting and often requires repeated exposure and active practice (Nation, 2001). MALL applications—equipped with interactive flashcards, quizzes, and context-rich examples—offer promising tools for supporting this process by making vocabulary learning more dynamic and adaptive to individual learner needs.

Despite the growing enthusiasm around MALL, empirical research investigating its effectiveness in TESOL contexts remains limited, particularly concerning measurable learning outcomes and learner

attitudes. This study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of mobile-assisted vocabulary learning on adult TESOL learners' retention and motivation. By providing evidence-based insights, the research seeks to inform educators about the practical benefits and challenges of integrating mobile technology into their teaching practices.

Methods

This study involved 60 adult TESOL learners enrolled in an intermediate English course at a language institute. Participants were randomly assigned into two groups: the experimental group, which used a mobile vocabulary learning app (Quizlet), and the control group, which received traditional paper-based vocabulary exercises. Both groups were taught the same target vocabulary over four weeks. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to measure vocabulary retention and recognition. Additionally, learner attitudes toward mobile learning were surveyed through a Likert-scale questionnaire (Stockwell, 2010).

Results

The experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary retention compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). On average, learners using the mobile app scored 15% higher on post-test assessments. Survey results indicated that 85% of the experimental group found the mobile app engaging and convenient, reporting increased motivation to study outside of class. In contrast, only 50% of the control group expressed similar enthusiasm for traditional methods. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the motivational benefits of MALL (Burston, 2015).

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has a significant positive impact on vocabulary acquisition among TESOL learners. One of the key factors contributing to this improvement appears to be the enhanced learner engagement that mobile technologies facilitate. Unlike traditional paper-based methods, mobile apps offer interactive and dynamic learning experiences through features such as quizzes, games, and immediate feedback. These interactive elements not only make learning more enjoyable but also encourage learners to spend more time practicing vocabulary, thereby increasing exposure and reinforcement.

The improved retention rates observed in the experimental group can be explained through well-established cognitive theories. Spaced repetition, a learning technique that involves reviewing information at increasing intervals, is a common feature in many mobile vocabulary apps. This technique has been shown to strengthen memory consolidation by counteracting the forgetting curve (Ebbinghaus, 1885/1964). Additionally, mobile apps often employ multimodal input—combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements—which caters to different learning styles and enhances encoding and recall processes (Paivio, 1986). This multimodality allows learners to engage multiple cognitive pathways, making vocabulary more memorable.

Moreover, learner attitudes toward mobile learning in this study highlight important motivational benefits. The convenience of accessing learning materials anytime and anywhere empowers learners to take control of their own study habits, fostering learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The novelty and gamified aspects of mobile apps further contribute to sustained interest and reduce the monotony often associated with traditional vocabulary drills.

However, despite these promising outcomes, the implementation of MALL in TESOL settings is not without challenges. Digital literacy varies widely among learners, and some may require additional support to effectively navigate mobile learning tools. There is also the issue of equitable access; not all students possess smartphones or stable internet connections, particularly in under-resourced contexts. Educators and institutions must therefore consider these factors to avoid exacerbating educational inequalities.

Future research should build on the current findings by investigating the long-term effects of MALL on vocabulary retention, as well as its impact on other key language skills such as listening, speaking, and grammar acquisition. Additionally, exploring how different types of mobile apps and instructional designs influence learning outcomes could offer deeper insights into optimizing mobile technology use in TESOL. Finally, qualitative studies examining learners' experiences and challenges with MALL can inform more inclusive and effective pedagogical approaches.

Conclusion

MALL represents a promising approach to enhancing vocabulary acquisition among TESOL learners. Empirical studies and theoretical analyses underscore its effectiveness in promoting learner autonomy, motivation, and retention of vocabulary. To fully realize the potential of MALL, educators and policymakers should consider strategies to overcome implementation challenges, such as providing professional development for teachers and ensuring equitable access to technology. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of MALL on vocabulary learning and its integration into diverse educational contexts.

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