

(MALL) IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN POST-COVID 19 ERA: IMPLEMENTATIONS AND ANTICIPATIONS

تعلم اللغة بمسانده الأجهزة المحمولة (MALL) في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في مرحله ما بعد الوباء:
التطبيق والتوقعات

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Abstract:

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is the most recent learning tool in the language education through which applications and websites are used to facilitate students learning. The spread of Covid-19 pandemic forced the educational institutions to adopt MALL and to use it to replace face-to-face teaching. Such unpredicted, quick move to use mobile technology brought a lot of opportunities for MALL adoption in educational institutions especially at those in the developing countries. This study aims to explore how MALL is being implemented in context of EFL in higher education after the pandemic period from the EFL teachers' perspective and how they envision the future of MALL in higher education. Using the qualitative method with a sample of four EFL teachers from a public university in Oman, it was revealed that MALL is still commonly used by EFL teachers. The analysis of the findings showed that mobile devices are being used in class and outside the class in various ways. The findings also revealed how the future of MALL would be from the perspective of the EFL teachers. The findings of this study encourage education providers, curriculum designers and EFL teachers to maximize the use of MALL in EFL context and reveal possibilities of incorporating mobile technology in EFL context at higher education institutions.

Key words: EFL, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, higher education, mobile learning, Oman, e-learning

Introduction:

Over the last two decades of the 21st century, technology has been utilized in all aspects of our lives including education. Since 2007, it has become more powerful after smart phones, tablets and e-book readers became available to be used for various purposes in different fields. In the field of education, using such devices to enhance learning and teaching process has become the focus of research. Portability, connectivity, recording sounds and taking photos and videos are some of the characteristics that offered new practices to teaching and learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006). These characteristics and features of such mobile devices were found effective in the field of language learning as it helped develop listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar (Al Hosni, 2016; Al-Shamsi et al., 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 in 2020 affected all aspects of our lives. The UNESCO (2019) reports



revealed that the pandemic had an impact on all educational systems worldwide and led to the closure of educational institutions in 130 countries worldwide in May 2020. According to the report by the United Nations (UNESCO, 2020) higher education institutions started to use mobile technologies to continue the scheduled academic activities in all educational institutions worldwide. Thus, institutions of higher learning in developed and in developing countries started to adapt programs and applications as distance-learning tools during the outbreak of COVID-19 (Ziraba et al., 2020).

Rationale of the study:

Many scholars and educators who investigated the use of mobile learning during the pandemic, concluded that the institutions should be ready for such situations in the future and that could be achieved by finding possibilities for incorporating technology. For example, (Salih & Omar, 2020) stated that:

Perhaps, among the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is the necessity of being prepared for a crisis of whatever type. This pandemic was not the first humanity experienced, and it will not be the last, and crisis can hit anytime and without warning. (p.72)

Many studies investigated the implementations of mobile learning in higher education institutions during the pandemic in many subjects other than language teaching (Guilbaud et al., n.d.; Iqbal & Bhatti, 2020; Kaliisa et al., 2022; Slimi, 2020). However, few studies examined the implementation of MALL in EFL in higher education institutions after the pandemic. Thus, this study comes to fill in that gap by exploring the current state of MALL in the EFL context in higher education after the pandemic. This study explores how EFL teachers are implementing Mobile-assisted Language Learning in the context of higher education in post-COVID19. Specifically, this research addresses the following **questions:**

1. How do EFL teachers use Mobile-assisted Language Learning to teach EFL at the university in Oman after the pandemic?
2. How do the EFL teachers envision the future of MALL in universities in Oman?

Literature Review:

A. Definition of MALL

Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) is the latest method to emerge in language learning which involves the use of applications to support students' learning (Nuraeni, 2021). According to Kukulska-Hulme (2018), MALL refers to "the use of smartphones and other mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where portability and situated learning offer specific advantages". In this definition, mobile devices refer to any handheld devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets (Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, 2008). MALL can be considered as a branch of Mobile Learning and an expansion of Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) which involves the use of computer technology for the sake of language learning (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Mobile



learning was defined as an extension of e-learning through mobile devices such as mobile phones. Mobile learning and e-learning were considered as subsets of distant learning (Georgiev et al., 2004). MALL is considered an evolution of CALL since mobile devices were derived from computer technology. Recently, there has been a shift from using desktop computers (CALL) to utilising mobile devices in language teaching (MALL) which involves the utilization of the mobile devices for educational purposes.

B. Advantages of MALL

The characteristics of mobile devices brought tremendous advantages to language learning. Mobile technology has special characteristics in terms of portability (Nariyati et al., 2020; Shahrokhi & Arashnia, 2016) connectivity and social interaction (Miangah, 2012). Since mobile devices are often in the users' pockets, they are more convenient and accessible than textbooks or desktop computers (Elaish et al., 2019). Mobility enabled the access to learning material offering new opportunities for collaboration, communication, knowledge accumulation through building, expanding and complementing the learning space (Scanlon, 2014)>

Recently, applications have started to offer communication platforms that enable users to start audio or even video calls. Thus, using such applications is becoming popular among language learners to practice speaking and join in conversations using English language. Such apps create the opportunities for students to engage in authentic conversation. For example, Cambly, is an application for practising English with native speakers of English language over video chat (Dincer & Dariyemez, 2020). Another example is Duolingo, which enables the users to design "Clubs" where they can interact and discuss (Sharma, 2021). Thus, language learning apps can play an active role in the learning process by exposing learners to authentic content and providing opportunities for communication with native speakers of English language.

The effectiveness of contextualizing mobile learning practices on improving listening skills was emphasize in many research studies. In Oman, the study by Al-Shamsi et al. (2020) revealed the merits of the integration of mobile phones in EFL classes. The results of their experimental research was that using mobile devices can motivate language learners to be self-regulated and get more practice on using the language and more exposure. Besides, the findings of the study showed that EFL learners have a positive attitude towards the use of mobile phones in language learning despite the challenges related to the design of mobile software, screen size of mobile phones, network connections, and the listening content (Al-Shamsi et al., 2020, p.34).

Similarly, the findings of the research study by Al-Malki (2020) on the effectiveness of MALL applications on undergraduate students' acquisition of vocabulary in English language classes in Oman showed that using mobile devices has significantly improved their vocabulary acquisition. For the purpose of the study, the participants in the experimental group were exposed to a series of Quizlet study sets containing selected



topics from the university prescribed curriculum. Pre-and post-tests were implemented, and it was found that the participants in the experimental group learnt a number of vocabulary individually and collaboratively as well. The findings revealed that the students' performance in vocabulary acquisition significantly increased. In addition, focus groups were also conducted to investigate their vocabulary learning experience regarding the integration of Quizlet into EFL classrooms. Quizlet was effective in creating a challenging and collaborative learning environment.

Mobile devices have a lot of benefits and affordances that could accelerate the language learning process. Using mobile devices in language learning was described by Almofadi (2020) as *"a process without limits, with teaching and learning possible both within and outside the classroom, in formal and informal environments, allowing learners a degree of control over their EFL journey"* (p.37).

The positive impact of using MALL on the linguistic performance of EFL learners has been supported by findings of many research studies in Arab countries (Zain & Bowles, 2021). However, the proper development of the mobile learning approach needs a curriculum that is pedagogically adjusted and methods that fit the new features of the mobile resources, and well trained and motivated teachers and learners (Al-Shamsi et al., 2020).

C. Implementations of MALL

Mobile devices were used to perform several tasks that, in turn, led to achieve many educational objectives. For instance, in many institutions mobile devices are used to achieve organizational objectives like communication between faculty members, parents and students and accelerating professional development (Nguyen et al., 2015). Furthermore, educators utilize mobile devices by involving students in recording and listening to video and audio clips, searching and sharing information (Iqbal & Bhatti, 2020). Moreover, the availability of the internet and the existence of Google Docs, Google Hangouts, Skype, Wikis, have made education more collaborative, interactive, and efficient (Sarker et al., 2019). Although there was a wide, rapid expansion of educational technology before COVID-19, the pandemic has altered the methods of teaching and learning (Hoq, 2020). There has been a remarkable progress in the usage of online tools i.e., video conferencing, virtual tutoring, webinar during the pandemic. Using a mobile phone, teachers and students can use YouTube to watch educational content, Zoom and Google Meet for video conferencing, Safari to browse Internet (Khalil et al., 2020).

D. Related Studies

Covid-19 pandemic has forced the higher education institutions everywhere to be more innovative regarding the use of technology to support students' learning (Guilbaud et al., n.d.). Consequently, many studies recently aimed at examining the uses and investigating the experience of using mobile devices. Many studies focused on examining MALL effectiveness as a tool for teaching in the absence of face-to-face method during the pandemic.



Many studies were conducted in Arab countries to explore MALL acceptance and uses among students and teachers. In Algeria, for example, a mixed-method research study was conducted by Saidouni & Bahloul (2016) with a sample of eighty (80) postgraduate students, and fourteen (14) EFL teachers at the university. The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data showed that both teachers and students have positive attitude towards MALL and emphasized that MALL is a promising tool for EFL teaching and learning. Moreover, students have shown both their willingness and motivation towards using mobile devices for language learning; however, the findings suggested that more time, pedagogical infrastructure, and training is required. This was similar to the finding of the studies conducted on MALL in the Gulf countries.

A study was conducted in Saudi Arabia by Alghamdi (2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that mobile learning is beneficial and has the potential to support and enhance EFL teaching. The aim of the study by Alghamdi (2022) was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions regarding mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) including their attitudes, levels of proficiency, and challenges they experienced when implementing MALL. The data were collected from 123 EFL teachers at elementary schools in Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that the teachers' have positive perceptions of MALL, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the EFL teachers who received professional development training were more positive than teachers who did not receive it. It was found that mobile learning is a beneficial tool to support and enhance EFL teaching; however, there were some challenges such as the teachers' insufficient abilities to develop MALL activities in EFL learning.

The experience of EFL learners in higher education institutions in Oman during the pandemic was examined. Salih & Omar (2022) conducted a study to understand the experience of online teaching and learning during the pandemic as perceived by 112 EFL students of a higher learning institution in Oman. The analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that more than 50% of the participants were more comfortable reading online materials than paper texts which, according to Salih & Omar (2022), indicates that students continue to learn outside their classes. Such expansion of learning outside the classroom is an opportunity for the students to maximize their learning and enhance their academic progress. The results also showed that more than 51% of the students agreed that online learning helped them sharpen their English language skills, and over 65% of the participants reported that they improved in their email writing and communication skills. Likewise, 51% of the students reported that online learning facilitated writing assignments and academic writing improvement.

Methodology:

The qualitative method was used in this study to explore the implementation of MALL in EFL teaching at the public universities in Oman. The semi-structured interview was the instrument used to collect data. The sample was four teachers who have been teaching



EFL in the English Language Centre at one of the public universities in Oman. A pilot version of the interview questions was sent to a university professor who suggested some amendments to be made in the phrasing of some questions. After attaining agreement on the validity and relevancy of the items through a pilot test, the face-to face interviews were conducted and recorded. The informants were two male and two female EFL teachers who have rich experience in the field of EFL and have been teaching EFL there during the last six years. They were ideal candidates to provide data regarding the implementations of MALL in EFL teaching after the pandemic since they have experienced teaching EFL there before, during and after the pandemic, which would help explore the various uses of MALL and the future of MALL in the context of EFL at the university.

Findings:

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews are thematically analysed. The findings and the emerging themes will be discussed under the research question they address.

1. How do EFL teachers use Mobile-assisted Language Learning to teach EFL at the university in Oman after the pandemic?

The informants provided examples of how MALL is being implemented after the pandemic. Several ways to implement MALL inside and outside the classroom have been mentioned by the informants, which were grouped by the researcher into three main uses:

a. Educational Games

Playing games online was mentioned by all informants and was considered one of the effective ways to make learning English language easier and more joyful. For example, two informants reported that they use KAHOOT in class through mobile devices to make language learning more effective and fun. Many studies have previously discussed the effect of such educational games on students' performance and learning.

b. E-learning Platform

"During the pandemic, the campus was closed, and the faculty members and students downloaded the Moodle application" (Informant 3). This, according to the participants, offered many services to the students. They use their phones to apply for postponement of study, appeal, or upload their forms in addition to doing the regular tasks related to their learning on the Moodle platform. The informants described the flexibility offered by mobile technology. Using their mobile devices, the teachers can login to e-learning to upload materials, or update settings of tasks or assignments any time and without the need to reach their desktops or be at their offices. *"It's easier now. I remember few years ago we had to be at the office and use the PC there to do many task that we now do through our phones. Now I can share or upload files or check assignments on Moodle"* (Informant 4).



c. Social Media Applications

All the participants mentioned that they use social media application, specifically WhatsApp to disseminate important notices and to exchange feedback with students. Two informants mentioned that they receive messages from their students with regard their marks and enquiries about some topics which had been discussed in class time. According to one of the participants: *“students interact more using such applications in their mobile devices as they are always using them to do different tasks in their everyday life”* (Info. 2). Three informants reported that they create WhatsApp groups for their students every semester and maintained that this is an effective way to share documents or important notices and to get instant responses from the students.

2. How Do the EFL Teachers Envision the Future of MALL in Universities?

All the participant believed that mobile devices are beneficial in EFL teaching. They expressed how MALL was a powerful tool for language teaching and learning during the closure of the campus due to the widespread of COVID-19. All the informants indicated that many teachers continue to use MALL after the pandemic in various ways like using emails, educational games, and social media. Furthermore, it was reported that many teachers informally continue using Google Meet, Ms Teams in their teaching after the pandemic. Moreover, informant. 3 maintained that the widespread of the pandemic paved the way for further implementation for mobile technology and the institutions should make use of that to achieve their objectives. Informant 3 stated:

Nowadays, students at schools and universities have gained some skills and knowledge about using mobile devices in their education. They must have signed up for google accounts, tried video conferencing, attend virtual classrooms and used some applications to upload their homework and assignments. In every house, parents have bought a laptop, iPad or smart phones. We have to make advantage of all of this and find ways to encourage them use mobile technology to expand their learning of the language and to make teaching and learning easier and more effective.

Informants expect MALL to become an essential element of the pedagogical framework. Two of them expressed their ideas about having hybrid or blended learning. They expect mobile technology to be formally incorporated in the higher education system. Another point was raised by two informants was that the university should keep the faculty and the students prepared and ready to use digital platforms when need arises.

Discussion:

The analysis of the data from the semi-structured interviews with the EFL teachers revealed three main uses of mobile devices: playing educational games, longlining to the university e-learning platform, and using social media applications. Using mobile devices for playing educational games online was largely explored in many studies in literature. It was reported that KAHOOT provided the students with opportunity to engage more deeply with content materials and improved interactions with instructors and peers due



to its collaborative nature (Sprague, 2019). Moreover, it was found that it improved students' vocabulary knowledge (Dickinson, 2019). Moreover, findings of recent studies conducted in the EFL context at a university in the United Arab Emirates suggest that gamified digital platforms could be incorporated as part of the teaching pedagogy to retain students' attention, increase participation, and provide students with an enhanced enjoyable learning experience (Alawadhi & Abu-Ayyash, 2021). Therefore, having such platforms in higher education might be advantages and beneficial.

In this study, the teachers reported that by offering various channels for communication between students and teachers through using WhatsApp groups and e-learning platforms anywhere and at any time, mobile devices enable teachers and students to accomplish many tasks which in turn accelerate the process of teaching and learning by. The findings go in line with the uses previously discussed by Nguyen et al (2015) who stated that mobile devices are used to obtain organizational objectives such as communication between faculty members and students and supported those of Iqbal & Bhatti (2020) which emphasized that mobile devices are effective medium for off-campus learning and communication. The informants mentioned the uses of WhatsApp to provide feedback to students and to get instant responses on some urgent issues like attendance or exam notices. The benefits of using WhatsApp in EFL context in Oman was supported and discussed in many studies before the widespread of Covid-19 (Shekaili, 2016) and during the pandemic (Slimi, 2020). Two of the informants maintained that the institution should prepare the faculty and the students to be able to use digital platforms when need arises. This was also emphasized in previous research by Salih & Omar (2020) who urge education providers to be more prepared as COVID-19 might not be the last crisis the humanity would experience.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study showed that using mobile devices in EFL teaching is considered a beneficial tool by EFL teachers who also reported that they are still utilizing the features and applications on their mobile devices to enhance their students' learning and to accomplish various tasks at work. The findings of this study encourage and support education providers, curriculum designers and EFL teachers maximize the use of MALL in EFL context at higher education and to find ways to integrate MALL in EFL teaching. It is recommended that the institutions study the possibilities of incorporating MALL formally in EFL curriculum in the future. Moreover, exploring ways to incorporate gamified digital platforms as part of the teaching pedagogy in higher education institutions would help to attain the advantages of using digital games which have been discussed earlier in this paper. The institutions may also conduct session to inform students and teachers about the affordances of MALL in language teaching and learning, and to encourage them to keep updated with the new trends in language learning which in turn help to expand their



knowledge and strengthen their skills to help them smoothly adjust to any unexpected transformation in the future.

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