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## Special issue of ReCALL on Mobile Assisted Language Learning

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## *Editorial*

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As in other areas of education where the possibilities offered by mobile learning are being increasingly investigated, there is a growing body of research in the field of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). In this volume of *ReCALL*, we present a selection of papers by researchers from around the world about different aspects of MALL.

Widespread ownership of portable, convergent devices is enabling learners to participate in learning at any time and from any location, individually or in contact with others. Mobile learning research attempts to understand the evolving habits and requirements of mobile learners, as well as exploiting the capabilities of the devices. The effects on conceptions of learning and teaching are also being studied. The number of publications and conferences in the field of mobile learning is thus proliferating.

In language learning, although MALL has not yet been embraced on a large scale, sufficient research has been carried out for it to have been identified as separate from computer assisted language learning (CALL). Unlike CALL, MALL uses a wide range of devices, often with internet connectivity, from ultra-portable laptops and handhelds to mobile phones, digital voice recorders, MP3 and MP4 players, digital cameras and video recorders; in other words, MALL devices are not necessarily computers, although a computer, whether desktop, laptop or handheld is usually involved at some point, if only to connect to the internet. Furthermore, MALL has the potential to assist learners at the exact point of need and in ways that are congruent with learners' increasingly mobile, always-connected lifestyles.

While much MALL research reports on the outcomes of using various mobile devices for language learning, few investigate learner preferences concerning the devices

employed to complete activities. In Stockwell's paper, we are presented with an investigation of vocabulary learning by students of English in Japan that considers whether learners opt for mobile phones or desktop computers when provided with a choice. The author outlines the need to design appropriately for the medium as well as learners' perceived and actual use of mobile phones to support their vocabulary learning. The study provides information about uptake of MALL activities by a group of mostly pre-intermediate level Japanese learners of English who were motivated by the need to maintain their grade point average.

The majority of papers in this special issue address individual studies of various aspects of mobile language learning. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, however, provide an overview of studies that have been carried out in the last six years or so. While not claiming to provide an exhaustive review of work carried out in MALL, the paper analyses studies in terms of their context (formal or informal, teacher or learner led, content or design driven), the devices employed, the activity types (individual or collaborative) and the modalities used (text, audio, video, speech). The authors conclude that there is much interesting and valuable research, but that MALL is not, as yet, well understood and requires further investigation and development as well as serious consideration of the possible barriers to its adoption.

Describing research that took place in Hong Kong, Song & Fox demonstrate that at least some learners are capable of using a mobile device to support and extend their learning in self-directed ways. This small study focused on use of dictionaries as well as other ways that learners chose to support their incidental vocabulary learning in English. It shows how the learners communicated informally and spontaneously about word meanings with other students and with lecturers; it also gives some insights into why they switched between personal digital assistants (PDAs) and desktop computers, highlighting the strengths and limitations of each tool. This longitudinal study gives rich data about mobile device use by motivated, advanced learners, who are willing actively to define their own language needs and select resources, tools and communication methods that will help them.

Kennedy and Levy's project in Australia shows the value of 'out-of-class' language practice opportunities delivered to students' mobile phones by SMS. Different types of message were sent to beginner-level students of Italian language and culture, primarily aiming to consolidate their learning and alert them in a timely way to events and activities that might be of interest on an optional basis. The research tackles the dual challenge of a 160-character limit for text messages and low target language proficiency levels among the learners. Skilful crafting of messages shows what is possible within these constraints. The social acceptability of timed delivery of messages to students' phones is also explored. The research reveals how these challenges help to shape the educators' thinking and articulate their objectives and priorities for mobile assisted language learning which is to take place outside of scheduled class hours.

Investigating learners' attitudes towards using mobile phones to develop their listening skills, Nah, White and Sussex describe a study where 30 Korean learners of EFL used mobile phones, a related website and a discussion board to engage in pre-, dur-

ing- and post-listening tasks. In contrast to Stockwell's study which investigated which devices – mobile or desktop – learners tended to employ when given the choice, activities for this research took place solely via mobile phone. Students' attitudes were generally positive, and, in comparison with face-to-face classroom activities, they believed mobile phones allowed them increased opportunities to experience comprehensible input, for negotiation of meaning and to provide comprehensible output.

Wishart's paper gives us a glimpse into what it is like for secondary school trainee teachers in the UK to experiment with using a loaned PDA for their own development and to support their language teaching. Successful uses included capturing events and reflections by making video clips and notes using the PDA. However the socio-cultural setting of traditional schools with established ways of using ICT, together with the ready availability of traditional but familiar technology such as cassette recorders, worked against whole-hearted adoption of the new devices.

Petersen, Divitini and Chabert present a case study using a mobile blog to support a sense of community for Norwegian learners of French during their study time in France. This paper raises the issue of what is meant by 'mobile' in the term *mobile assisted language learning*; not only does it focus on the mobile learner rather than the mobile device, but it also includes the social groups and communities with whom s/he interacts. The authors describe the effect on community development of starting a mobile blog before the learners travelled to France and, in the light of the outcomes of their research, suggest ways in which the overall sense of community might be strengthened.

The collection of papers in this volume addresses secondary and tertiary education, mobile devices and mobility of learners. The authors describe both the successes and challenges they faced, and consider some of the barriers to the adoption of MALL. These barriers still need to be better understood and include designing specifically for mobile devices with their physical limitations in terms of screen size and ease of text-entry, and the financial cost to the learner of engaging in MALL. It is, perhaps, this latter issue that may prove to be most troublesome; although the cost of buying mobile devices is dropping, the cost of owning and using these devices is much less affordable in many parts of the world. By requiring learners to engage with mobile learning and MALL, there is a danger that some will be disenfranchised by virtue of the cost. As we move to embrace MALL, these barriers must be recognised and taken into consideration.

Although the participants involved in the above studies were often implicitly mobile, in the sense of having regular periods of commuting or travel (e.g. in the case of trainee teachers, travel between placement schools and university), the research has not been directed at discovering how mobile devices are used specifically during these periods of mobility and travel, for instance on public transport or while walking around. Further research in this direction would enable us to understand the precise circumstances in which it is acceptable and beneficial to engage in language learning on the move. To advance research in MALL, we believe that it is necessary to inquire further into the mobility habits and portable technology prefer-

ences of those whose language learning and teaching are to be the object of investigation.

### **Announcement**

The following papers, for which there was insufficient space in this issue, will be published in *ReCALL* Vol 21 (1) in January 2009:

- MALL Technology: Use of Academic Podcasting in the Foreign Language Classroom  
*M'hammed Abdous, Margaret Camarena and Betty Rose*
- Mobile blogs in language learning: making the most of informal and situated learning  
*Anna Comas-Quinn, Raquel Mardomingo and Chris Valentine*

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