

Teaching and Learning French as a Foreign Language Through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

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Abstract

Learning through application is a philosophy that has recently started finding its place in French language learning. This paper discusses the use of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). It discusses the nature of MALL, the learning culture in MALL, and the limitations of the mobile environment in the context of French language learning using a few mobile applications. It asserts that notwithstanding the challenges, MALL is promising for learning French.

Keywords: Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL), Mobile learning, French as a foreign language

Introduction

Mobile Technology has changed our lives drastically. It is also changing how languages are learnt. The use of mobiles for learning in education is called mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). Mobile learning has been interpreted in terms of portability and time flexibility or tools like cell phones, smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), pods and other handheld devices. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) define mobile learning as “learning mediated via handheld devices and potentially available anytime, anywhere. Such learning may be formal or informal” (p. 273). Sharples et al. (2007 cited in Bachore, 2015, p. 50) define learning through mobiles similarly as a “process of gaining knowledge through conversations across multiple contexts among people and personal using interactive technologies with a focus on contexts”. The features

of personal use portability enabling new learning methods with an emphasis on uninterrupted access and interaction across contexts makes MALL different from computer-assisted language learning. This paper discusses the nature of mobile language learning, the learning culture in MALL, and the limitations of the mobile environment in French language learning.

Nature of Mobile Learning

Mobile learning features that strike anyone are its ubiquity, portability, flexibility, and accessibility. Affordance is another feature of mobile learning, although some scholars differentiate between affordance and affordance actualization (Hwang, 2021; Strong et al., 2014). Cheon et al. (2012) add a few other features of mobile learning. According to them,

m-learning supports individualized learning by allowing students to pace learning at their own speed. Second, the situated learning is realized as students use mobile devices to learn within a real context. For example, students can learn about social responsibility through Starbucks Shard Planet, a program that minimizes environmental impact with the use of recycled and reusable cups. Third, m-learning enables collaborative learning when students use mobile devices to easily interact and communicate with other students. Finally, informal learning is realized when students learn out of class at their convenience (p. 1055).

The nature of MALL is aligned with the action-oriented approach elucidated in the Companion Volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). According to this document,

the action-oriented approach represents a shift away from syllabuses based on a linear progression through language structures, or a pre-determined set of notions and functions, towards syllabuses based on needs analysis, oriented towards *real-life tasks* and constructed around purposefully selected notions and functions" (p.28, emphasis added).

This stress on real-life tasks consists of learning languages through real-life tasks, promoting task-based learning. The framework sees learners as social agents using language for communication rather than a subject for study.

Mobile learning has opened the language learning avenues for learners of different age groups (young or adults), purpose of learning (school goers or as a hobby), formal or informal (in class or outside the classroom), and focus (general or specific needs of learners). The use of MALL for teaching French has opened a variety, a variety of French, the French language for specific purposes (Crass et al., 2007).

The Learning Culture in MALL

Mobile learning applications like podcasts, E-blogs, vlogs and YouTube channels facilitate French language learning. Since most of these applications are linked with a host of social media platforms, they create opportunities for second and foreign French language learners to connect with native speakers and like-minded communities through mediums such as reels, bite-sized videos, Instagram/Facebook live sessions, discussions on the French language forums and exchange of playlists/ audiobooks. These modalities of m-learning are extensions rather than alternatives to iTalkie, Instagram and Duolingo.

MALL creates an authentic learning environment that is interactive and contextualized. Applications such as iTalkie, Duolingo or Tandem are some such examples. These platforms provide authentic learning experiences and support French learners by involving native French instructors, volunteers and experts who aspire to promote French language and culture. The authentic learning environment raises learners' curiosity, motivates them to further their learning and liberates them from the fear of being judged or observed.

iTalkie is an example where students learn French and prepare for the French competitive exams with support from native French teachers. Students save their lessons, bookmark the concepts, hear the audio tracks on a loop, use a chatbot to connect instantly with the language community, troubleshoot doubts by reading the explanation provided, and request a discussion or feedback. These features make the learning environment dynamic.

The podcast *Français avec Pierre*, a part of Spotify, helps in MALL. Image 1 shows the interface of the podcast; image 2 provides the list of lessons from the oldest to the most recent for ease of access; images 3 and 4 help learners to connect with the community of learners by sharing the content of the podcast with the feature of 'share' as well as downloading and replaying the lessons as per one's convenience.

Images 1, 2, 3 and 4: The Four Images in Podcast Français avec Pierre

Image 1



Image 3

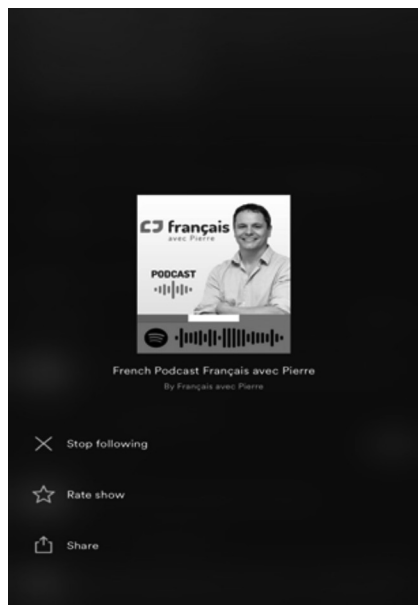


Image 2

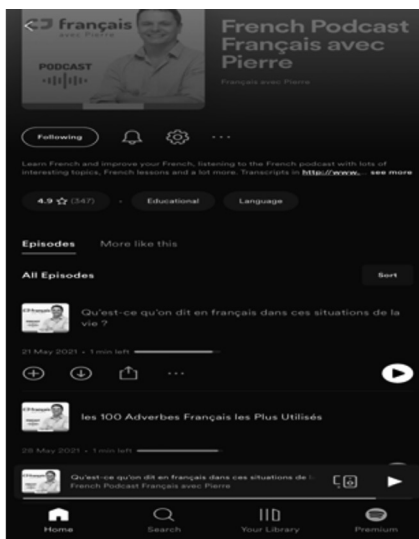
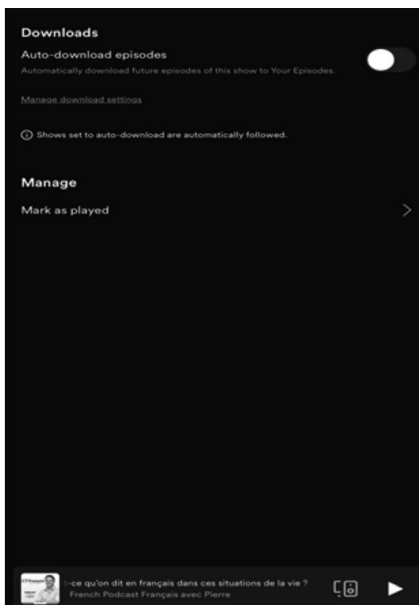


Image 4



(Images taken from <https://open.spotify.com/show/2VzCU0EcAL40Jp85Asg0ss?si=12364229c890495f>)

The MALL enables the learners to listen repetitively on Spotify, referring to the transcriptions to distinguish between lexical and syntactic units. Listening allows a learner to get closer to the meaning of the message. Firstly, they recognize the language sounds, intonations, and pronunciations and then start decoding the idea. They also understand the importance of their renditions being free from mother tongue influences. YouTube is another application where learners can repeatedly access audio and video recordings for different durations. Such repetitions contribute to conceptual clarity.

The feature of reading comprehension, which is a part of MALL, makes it learner-friendly due to the availability of E-books, the internet, storage space on the devices, audio features to read the text, and bookmark little details and important documents. These were earlier done by the learners manually, but now they can access it on their phone. Discussions on books, sharing interpretations, discussing points of view and reflecting on the reading material are ways reading comprehension is enhanced. Access to Google Assistant helps to foster enthusiasm among students for learning French. MALL also helps learners to take ownership of their learning and become autonomous learners not only in the classroom but in libraries, their homes and other places. Hence, the MALL allows learning to occur in formal and informal settings.

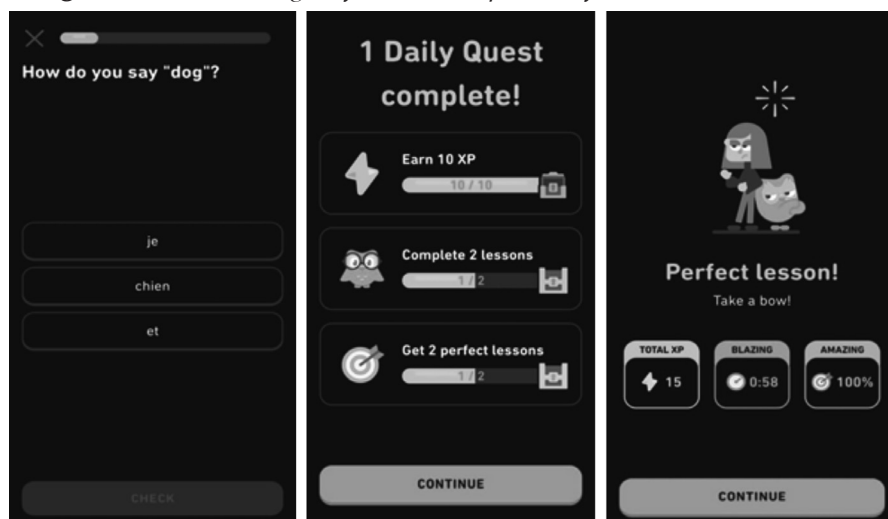
MALL also focuses on the social aspect of learning. Learners meet new people, interact with experts from francophone nations, and engage in conversations to exchange local information. These interactions highlight the social interactivity of MALL.

Another feature of MALL is that it creates opportunities for collaborative learning. The voice and chat-based approaches of interactive applications are conducive to higher levels of collaboration. In these approaches, students chat with one another or with a native French student or a speaker. Moderators such as proficiency levels, intervention duration, instructional approaches and intervention settings support these collaborations. Golub (1988, p. 1) aptly comments, “collaborative learning has as its main feature a structure that allows for student talk, students are supposed to talk to each other as they work together on various classroom projects and activities, and it is in this talking that much of the learning occurs”.

Language applications like Duolingo support quizzes and exercises to

indicate the learner's score and a note on the proficiency level achieved. Efficient MALL is possible because of enhanced connectivity. MALL has helped to form communities of learners and learning practices.

Images 5, 6 and 7: *Images of Quiz, Completion of Quiz and Score Obtained.*



(Images from Duolingo)

Image 5 shows the kind of questions asked in quizzes, Image 6 helps learners keep a tab on the number of tasks and quizzes completed in a day, and Image 7 displays the score achieved by the learner.

Limitations of MALL

This evolving mobile learning undoubtedly promotes social, contextual and collaborative learning but has its share of challenges. The critical challenge with MALL is that the E-learning platform needs instructional design. Second, though the content is adequate and enriching, it sometimes fails to serve the intended purpose because the lessons are listed without any order (Image 8). Learners need an idea of which lessons are basic and advanced. The absence of this awareness leaves them confused without proper orientation, making learning difficult.

Image 8: *Random Sequencing of Lessons*

Chu (2014) questions the benefits of combining real-world contexts and digital world resources. In an experimental study on in-field activity on an indigenous culture course of an elementary school with a formative assessment-based learning strategy, students of the control group scored more than students of the experimental group. The scores of students in the experimental group in the post-test were below the pre-test. Based on the findings, Chu concludes that an “inadequate instructional design may have a negative impact on learning achievements due to excessive cognitive load” (p. 332).

The language-learning applications provide grammar or vocabulary-building exercises to test the user’s knowledge. More instructions, relevant examples and cultural aspects must be included. The absence of these may demotivate learners. The exercises can only show the number of correct and incorrect responses, but the feedback from an instructor is only available on a few mobile learning platforms (see Image 6). Furthermore, due to the availability of several mobile applications for language learning, learners frequently navigate from one application to another to avail of the best mobile-based applications. This phenomenon, known as ‘app-smashing’ is defined as the “process of developing content on multiple digital applications and then integrating or smashing them together in order to create, a richer, innovative

digital product” (Kuloweic, 2013, cited in Brenner and Hauser, 2015, p. 337). App-smashing can sometimes be creative, but only sometimes, as the order of the content and exercises can be completely different. Navigating multiple apps may disorient the learner from their goals of language acquisition.

Time flexibility (short or long duration) and irregular participation of learners in MALL may be less fruitful and effective. Such a kind of learning is fragmented. Another area for improvement with mobile learning is the disruptive behaviour of learners. In a study on the perception of pre-service teachers on mobile learning by O’Bannon and Thomas (2015), the results showed that teachers perceived “cheating, disruptions, cyberbullying, and accessing inappropriate content as major barriers to the use of mobile phones in the classrooms” (p. 110). Frequent notifications, messages, updates, or sometimes battery discharge distract learners. These challenges do not outweigh the benefits, but addressing the limitations renders MALL more effective. The paper does not include gamification elements, reliability of content and feedback window, which are critical evolving areas for enhancing the effectiveness of mobile learning.

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