

*Concurrent Instruction of Japanese Adult Learners via Independent CALL
Methods and Classroom Instruction*

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the efficacy of teaching EFL learners through an approach that combines independent computer-based receptive skills learning with weekly classroom-based lessons focusing on speaking, listening, and writing. The fifteen-week study aims to measure language learning through standardized testing, classroom observation, and online quiz results. Conscious learning was also monitored through periodic surveys. Learners were Japanese businessmen mostly aged 30s to early 40s with CEFR levels ranging from A2 to B1. Modern technology can provide a portable, adaptive, and multimodal experience. Over 90% of Japanese citizens under 60 now own smartphones (Communications and Information Network Association, 2017). To take advantage of the portability of the classroom, we must critically look at the effect on language learning that arises from integrating such programs into the curriculum. This study examines how such digital language learning materials can be exploited to create multifaceted language learning experiences. Learners showed a marked improvement in the volume of output, listening comprehension, willingness to engage in discussion, and rising standardized test scores. This paper will feature these results, along with samples of learner feedback from reflective portfolios and observational data from instructors to show how this combination of online and classroom study complemented each other to provide a positive academic environment. We will also examine how and when learners accessed the online applications. Finally, we will view Rosell-Aguilar's (2017) evaluation model of MALL applications and assert the need to add to it the criteria of how the app acquiesces with the learner's local context.

Keywords: Mobile Assisted Language Learning, Computer Assisted Language Learning, Communicative Language Teaching

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Introduction

The portability of the classroom has seen large growth as an area of research as access to smartphones, tablets, and other portable electronics has continued to rise over the past decade. The research in this paper aims to explore how benefits from online language learning programs that can be accessed via computer, tablet, or mobile phone can be utilized in tandem with classroom learning to achieve balanced learning of the four skills that work to complement each other.

According to Kim and Kwon (2012), most language-learning mobile apps focus on cognitive processes such as recognition, recall and comprehension, as well as receptive language skills, rather than socio-cognitive learning styles (p. 41). Such programs belie the affordances provided by modern mobile- and computer-based technology. Burston (2014) addresses this situation, stating that “ironically, it is precisely in the areas where they potentially have the most to offer – mobility, peer connectivity, oral interactions, and learner collaboration – that the advanced communication features of mobile phone technology have been, and continue to be, the least exploited in MALL [mobile assisted language learning]” (Burston, 2014, p. 350). While the dearth of language learning programs that proficiently use the interactive and collaborative nature of modern technology is unfortunate, that does not mean that the use of programs that do focus more on recognition, recall, comprehension, and receptive skills, as Kim and Kwon noted, should go unaddressed. It is important both to develop programs that take advantage of the affordances of modern technology, and to survey how to best use those programs which are commonly used by language learners. This research focuses on how to complement the use of MALL products commonly used with in-class instruction that takes into account the students’ learning outside of the classroom and their past language-learning experiences.

Method

The focus of this research is on viewing the success of learners who are simultaneously engaged in 1) a commercial online study program focusing on reading, listening, and grammar and 2) a 15-week classroom-based course focusing on communicative and presentation skills.

Participants

Learners were businessmen in Takara Belmont, an international Japanese company that makes dentist chairs, barbershop chairs, and hygiene products. The company selected 15 members to join the program. The members were all male, age 27-44. The group had a wide range of English experience and ability with initial TOEIC scores ranging from 285 to 715 (CEFR A2-B1).

Procedure

Participants used the commercial online study program, ReallyEnglish. They had a 6-month subscription containing one hundred units accessible via computer, tablet, or smartphone. However, students were only expected to complete 50 units within the 15-week time frame of the study. The program begins with a diagnostic test to

analyze and display the students' strengths and weaknesses. The program uses the results of the diagnostic test to select the first five units that the student undertakes. Students are required to pass each unit test with a score of at least 80%. The selection of the following five lessons are dictated by the results of the first five units and the process continues until all lessons have been completed. Students may retake lessons as many times as they like within the given time frame.

The curriculum of the 15-week classroom-based course was designed with the intent to provide aspects of language learning absent from the online learning course. Specifically, the oral interactions and learner collaboration aspects that Burston mentioned (above) were emphasized, along with aspects of language learning that are traditionally under-emphasized in the context of English education in Japan. For example, Japanese English education places a strong emphasis on focusing on the grammar, vocabulary, and reading ability necessary to pass university entrance exams. Thus, according to my observations, students often see a main goal of language learning as error-avoidance. The aversion to making mistakes leads to language learners unwilling to take risks in speaking. This results in hesitant speakers who take a long time constructing sentences in their minds before turning them into utterances or limiting themselves to the simple English that they have confidence speaking. To combat this, the curriculum focused on emphasizing to students the value of language growth through making mistakes and an emphasis on using English as a tool for communicating ideas and mutually making meaning. To set the backdrop, students were introduced to Rubin's (1975) seven characteristics of good language learners, why they are valuable, and how students can work to encompass them:

1. The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser.
2. The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. He is willing to do many things to get his message across.
3. The good language learner is often not inhibited. He is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results. He is willing to make mistakes in order to learn and communicate. He is willing to live with a certain amount of vagueness.
4. In addition to focusing on communication, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form. The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in the language.
5. The good language learner practices.
6. The good language learner monitors his own speech and that of others. That is, he is constantly attending to how well his speech is being received and whether his performance meets the standards he has learned.
7. The good language learner attends to meaning. He knows that in order to understand the message is not sufficient to pay attention to the language or to the surface form of speech. (46-47)

Rubin's characteristics of good language learners along with the instructor's mantra (*Mistakes are OK, mistakes are wonderful, let's make many mistakes together*) served as the backdrop for the class, in an attempt to create a paradigm shift for learners who came in with culturally defined expectations as to what language learning entails.

The 15 courses highlighted various grammar points (comparatives, superlatives, prepositions, suggestions) with opportunities for students to discuss aspects of their lives or create research questions that implement the target language. The learners were also put into contact with authentic material such as American restaurant menus used for cultural learning and role play, excerpts from Michael Pollan’s book, *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* (2009), and a speech given by Michio Kaku on technology in the year 2030. Students then worked in groups to create two presentations. The first involved suggestions and support for ways the instructor could become healthier and pass his yearly physical exam. The second involved pitching an idea for a future product for the company where they work to the board of directors.

Results

The averages include 14 of the 15 members (see Table 1). The other member finished the online program, but was transferred abroad before the final class and could not take the post-test.

Table 1 Average TOEIC Scores

	TOEIC Pre-Test	TOEIC Post-Test	Change
Listening Section	233.2	254.3	+21.1
Reading Section	207.1	239.3	+32.2
Total	440.4	493.6	+53.2

The learners increased their TOEIC scores in both the listening and reading section of the test. Moreover, a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare total test scores of the pre- and post-test. There was a significant difference between the scores of the pre-test (M=440.4, SD=113.25) and the post-test (M=493.6, SD=132.47); $t(13)=2.49$, $p=.027$. This shows that the program combining productive language classes and online learning of grammar, reading, and listening led to significant growth in English language ability.

During the class, the students were also observably more confident in their speaking, communication, and presentation skills. During their first presentation, nearly all members read from a pre-written script and were noticeably distressed. However, none of the members read from a script for the final presentation. There were, of course, errors in their speech. However, they were able to accurately communicate their ideas to the audience with confidence.

The increase in confidence was not only observable by the instructors, but was perceived by the research participants as well. In their post-study surveys, many students wrote about their increased confidence in speaking and communication. Twelve students responded to the question “Compared to the beginning of the course, do you feel you have improved your English ability? In what areas?” by including that they felt that either their speaking ability or their confidence in communicating had improved. For example, one student stated (all survey results translated from Japanese),

The moment I realized ‘I can express myself with simple English!’, I lost my aversion to speaking English and it became enjoyable. Also, I lost a lot of my aversion to speaking English through doing the presentations. During the first presentation, I used a cheat sheet when I presented and I don’t really feel like my speaking improved. However, for my second presentation I prioritized simple English that I could easily speak and practiced so I could present without looking at my notes. I was able to feel my speaking level improve. I’m sure I made some mistakes and I forgot parts of my speech, but I was able to choose my words as I spoke. I felt like I improved not only my skill, but also my mindset.

A tertiary goal of the study was to see which forms of technology are preferred by Japanese businessmen. Learners had the freedom to access the online program via smartphone, tablet, or personal computer. Smartphones were overwhelmingly the tool of choice for the participants (see Table 2).

According to exit surveys, a majority of learners used smartphones on their daily commute to work. When asked when they studied, 12 out of 15 learners responded that they used their daily commute to use the program and 10 out of 15 responded that they studied in the evening before going to sleep. We have previously asserted that *how* learners access online applications is a function of *when* and *where* they can most readily access the application on a regular basis. Thus, adult learners in Japan are most likely to have time available to study as they ride the train to work. This encourages their use of smartphones, due to their portability and prevalence (Pool, J. et al., 2018).

Table 2 Tools used to access ReallyEnglish application

Tools Used	Number of Learners
Smartphone	10
Tablet	1
PC	1
Smartphone & Tablet	0
Smartphone & PC	3
Tablet & PC	0
Smartphone, PC, & Tablet	0

Discussion

What are the criteria one should use for evaluating MALL technologies? Numerous frameworks have been put forth (Sweeney and Moore, 2012; Rodriguez-Arancon, Arus, and Calle, 2013). Most recently, Rosell-Aguilar (2017) identifies various criteria for evaluating MALL technologies residing in four categories: language learning, pedagogy, user experience, and technology (p. 253). While the questions, such as “Is engagement with the app content active or passive?” (Ibid) offer an excellent method of evaluating MALL technology in isolation, it is also important to ask how the technology fits with the curriculum. Very seldom is MALL used in isolation. Most often it is used in conjunction with coursework or other methods of self-study. Thus, any evaluation of an online learning program should reflect this characteristic. From a teacher’s point of view, a crucial criterion is curricular fit. Burston (2014b) offered the criticism that most MALL projects lack curricular

integration and that the realization of MALL's full potential "is more a matter of pedagogy than technology" (p. 344). MALL projects must be seen as a tool to achieve curricular goals. They can be seen no more as curricular goals in and of themselves than can pens or paper.

While online English learning programs that fail to fulfill the potentiality of MALL technology are often seen as failing and evaluated poorly, this mindset can overlook the benefits of such programs used in conjunction with a complementary curriculum. This paper provides no empirical evidence of this assertion. No control groups were used and no comparisons can be made between different combinations of types of online programs and methods of classroom teaching. Rather, it is meant to further the discussion on the complexity of evaluating MALL technology.

Looking toward the future, we must further search for appropriate evaluation models for MALL technology not only in isolation, but how well such programs can be integrated into the learner's larger language-learning framework. In a recent survey, the Communications and Information Network Association of Japan found that over 90% of 1,200 respondents were using a smartphone (2017) and that it was their main-use device. With mobile devices such as smartphones reaching such common usage in both Japan and to varying extents across the world, it is imperative that we select programs that fit into a larger scheme of balanced language learning, whether these be rote memorization programs that fit into a communicative learning classroom, opportunities for collaboration and interaction to complement students taking explicit grammar courses, or online extension activities that allow learners to develop their knowledge in authentic ways.

Language learners in this study fit the profile of learners who primarily use their smartphones when studying away from the home. The large percentage of participants who used their smartphones to study during their commutes to work shows the desire to efficiently use time. This is time afforded to those living in countries where public transportation is popular and it is also time that will likely become afforded to those in countries where self-driving cars become popular in the near future. The opportunities for mobile learning are increasing and must be taken into account by those with a stake in curriculum construction.

Conclusion

The evaluation of MALL language-learning programs must take into account its ability to be integrated with the learners' broader language-learning experience. Such an assertion is vague and difficult to test, but it is a reminder that a program is not necessarily more valuable in a specific situation if it ticks off the most boxes in an evaluation model. Such a program may be more valuable in a situation where it is compared in isolation, but the language needs of the learner in mobile learning situations will be determined, at least in part, by the types of language instruction and experiences he or she encounters outside of the program.

The research shown in this paper does not attempt to claim which types of programs are better or worse, but rather shows an example of the positive outcomes achieved from a MALL program that does not fulfill the potentiality of modern technology. Such programs are common and can fit into a curriculum that emphasizes communicative learning and presentation skills. Adding the lens of curricular fit to MALL evaluation can give us a more accurate view of the value of a particular program.

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