Trainee Teacher Perceptions of Smartphones as Teaching Resources

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Abstract

A range of research exists which documents how language learners use and perceive of smartphones as language learning resources. However, there remains a scarcity of research exploring readiness among educators to integrate smartphones into their teaching practices, and such investigation of the implementation of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) among EFL instructors is needed. This paper reports on a study of trainee teachers on a Master's Degree Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programme which examined both their existing MALL practices and their attitudes towards the future integration of MALL in their classrooms, and moreover, the extent to which they place importance on, and consequently, value training in, the use of smartphones as language teaching resources. Through a combination of survey and semi-structured interviews, the researcher first reports on their existing MALL practices and the factors which influence these, and then describes various contextual aspects which either increased or limited their enthusiasm for the integration of MALL in their teaching practices. The study with some comments on their perceptions of their responsibility as future English teachers and MALL practitioners, and the hope that the shifting perceptions identified in this study may become more widespread and may have knock-on effects on the training and support on offer to teachers who wish to better implement MALL activities and resources as part of their teaching repertoires.

Introduction

Smartphones have become an ever-present existence in the hands and lives of learners, to the point that they can be considered a 'digital appendage' (Hynes, 2021, p. 72), and there is a wealth of research into how language learners use and perceive the devices (Metruk 2022). However, Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL), and indeed Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in general, remains poorly addressed in many teacher-training programmes, as frequent rapid advances in technology and 'the growing emphasis on 21st century skills raise a concern about English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' competencies in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) more than ever' (Park & Son, 2022, p. 320).

While MALL offers the potential for significant advances in language learning, and in particular, for informal language learning (Stockwell, 2021), many language teachers remain hesitant to actually employ the devices part of their teaching repertoire. Nikilopoulou *et al.* (2023) identified a number of barriers to the integration of MALL as a teaching method, including a lack of resources, a lack of support, and a lack of teacher confidence, which echoes Hafour's (2022) report that technical and digital literacy problems were the most challenging barriers to effective utilisation of mobile technologies.

While MALL advocates, such as the author of this paper, continue to argue for the importance of supporting learners in their development of the skills and knowledge needed to effectively employ smartphones as a learning resource, it is important to recognize that such a view may not be held universally among, or even by a majority of, students of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and research indicates that more studies are needed on this theme (Khan *et al.,* 2018). This study explores the attitudes held by trainee teachers on a TESOL programme to smartphones in terms of their readiness for, and sense of importance of, the role of smartphones as a teaching resource.

Methods

This study was conducted with students across two cohorts of a Masters Degree TESOL programme at a university in Scotland between February and October 2023. Of the 28 students across both deliveries of the programme, four were male and 24 female, and there were 15 different nationalities, with China and Pakistan most represented with five students each.

The study employed a mixed methods approach that combined quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. The survey was generated and distributed through Microsoft Forms, while the interview data was subjected to thematic analysis following the six-step process laid out by Braun and Clark (2006), in which themes are identified, aggregated, refined, and finalized. This qualitative process, in combination with the quantitative data from the survey, produced a data set that was robust in terms of both breadth and depth.

Results and Discussion

Three key themes were identified through the analytical process described above. The study first explored the participants' existing levels of comfort and readiness in relation to various devices. As Table 1 indicates, the survey data reveals that while a majority were comfortable

with laptops and desktops, there was a very notable drop regarding other devices, with 92.8% feeling very uncomfortable using smartphones in the classroom.
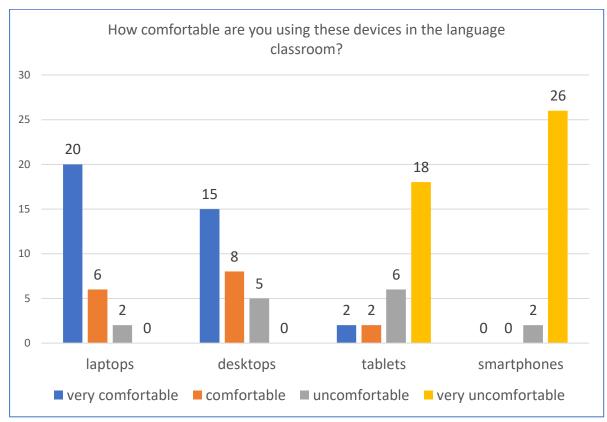

Table 1: Existing levels of comfort when using devices

This theme of readiness for mobile learning was further explored during interviews, and numerous participants revealed their lack of familiarity with smartphone resources. One commented that 'I'm not familiar with enough apps or how to use them effectively', while another focused on the fast-changing nature of resources, noting that 'I don't know which apps are any good or not, or even still available. It all changes so quickly.' Moreover, 92.9% (26/28) admitted that they did not know where to find information to help them become more familiar with MALL practices, and the need to familiarize themselves with LLAs was made explicit by another participant who commented that 'It's important for me to get to know them first, then maybe I'd try them.'

Overall, a majority of the participants' positive dispositions towards smartphones is evidenced by 21 comments by 19 different students, with one exemplary comment being ''Probably, they'll just get more and more common and from a younger age in the future, so it's something I'll need to learn.' Nevertheless, despite this disposition, and notwithstanding a recognition that, as one participant commented, 'I think we have a role in helping learners with this kind of thing', their own lack of familiarity with smartphones and LLAs, and a lack of knowledge regarding where to get useful information to improve familiarity, represented significant barriers in turning their positive attitudes into actual use of smartphones in the classroom.

However, as Table 2 indicates, a lack of familiarity was not the only factor that limited the participants' use of smartphones. There were also concerns over a potential loss of control in the classroom if students were given the freedom to use smartphones, and a related concern

regarding students becoming distracted by the devices, with participants mentioning the possibility of a short period of learning being followed by a longer period of distracted use, exemplified by one comment that 'The issue of distraction would be a problem…2 minutes of work and then they stay on the phones.'
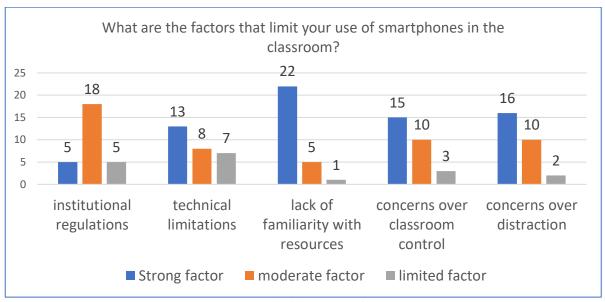

Table 2: Factors limiting use of smartphones

Moreover, given the home countries of the participants, which include countries where not just internet connectivity, but also electric power cannot be taken for granted, technical limitations were also identified as a notable concern from participants from various countries. It was primarily those participants from either the UK or China who reported these issues as only a limited factor. As one Nigerian participant commented, becoming more familiar with smartphones as a resource was 'down the list of things to learn. We need basic things like computers and even electricity first.'

The final theme described here is the kinds of support needed to raise levels of smartphone integration into their teaching repertoires. As Table 3 indicates, the most important factor is the need for more training to better familiarize themselves with MALL resources and teaching strategies, which coincides with the need for institutional support which would give them the time to undertake the necessary training. As one participant commented, 'I'd love to be involved, if I had time to do it.' The link between MALL and learner autonomy was also made clear by participants, as evidenced by the sentiment that 'I think the training would need to help me develop their autonomy too. It seems like that's where the real benefit would come in.'
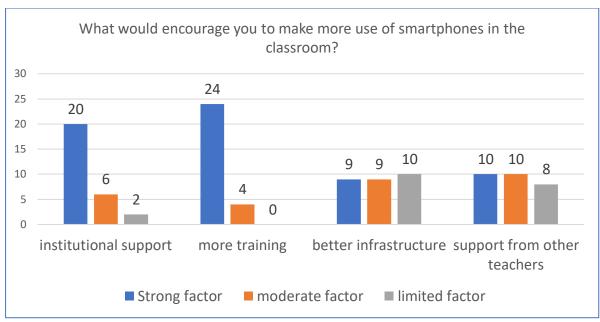
Table 3: Factors supporting smartphone integration

On the other hand, while some participants were positively disposed towards MALL, they did not see it as a priority, and depending on their teaching experience and their teaching environment, other issues were more urgent. Along with the participant from Nigeria who mentioned the more pressing need for stable electricity, another participant who had little teaching experience commented that 'I don't know…I feel like, if I'm going to get training, other things would be a higher priority.'

Overall, despite concerns regarding distraction and loss of control in the classroom that are already well documented in MALL literature (see for example, Metruk, 2020), the students in both MEd TESOL cohorts were, in principle, enthusiastic about MALL. Although none of the participants had any significant experience of MALL practices, with most having none whatsoever, they identified various benefits to MALL integration. For instance, during MALL-focused lectures on the programme, the cohorts welcomed exposure to the potential of social media as platforms on which learners, through curation of accounts being liked or followed, can generate a steady stream of exposure to authentic language on topics of interested to them, accompanied by the opportunity to comment on such posts. The links between MALL and independent learning were recognized, and a majority felt that making MALL a part of their teaching repertoire was not just a choice, but something which they felt was part of their role as current and future language teachers.

However, despite this generally positive disposition, actual MALL integration remained unlikely for most of the cohorts. Most reported a lack of training in MALL and familiarity with resources, and, crucially, a lack of awareness of how to go about finding such information or training opportunities, as well as the associated lack of institutional support that would give them the time and space to undertake such activity. Moreover, some participants from countries with less developed infrastructure noted that they had more pressing needs than MALL integration, including needs as basic as a stable supply of power in their schools. Although not explicitly focused on during the data collection process, in-class discussions which took place as part of MALL-focused lecture content on the MEd TESOL programme also highlighted the varying degrees of institutional permission that exist which allow students to bring their smartphones to school, or to use them during class.

Conclusions

This study explored the attitudes towards mobile-assisted language learning held by two cohorts of students on a Master's Degree in TESOL programme at a Scottish university. As this paper has described, their familiarity with language learning apps and other MALL resources are limited. Their lack of training and institutional support means that MALL integration remains unlikely for most, especially when balanced against more basic demands such as a reliable supply of power.

Nevertheless, despite these barriers, and although their existing MALL practices are virtually nonexistent, a majority remain generally enthusiastic about MALL and the role it could potentially play in learning both inside and beyond the classroom. Moreover, perhaps given the ubiquitousness of smartphone ownership in every country represented among the participants, and the access to resources the devices provide, it was notable that the participants generally considered familiarity with MALL not just an optional skillset but instead a responsibility they should bear as language teachers.

The implications of this are discovery are particularly significant, as they may highlight a developing teacher mentality regarding the centrality of MALL to language teaching and learning, and the responsibility of the language teacher in facilitating student use of the devices, that is more widespread. This perspective was evident despite the lack of and previous formal MALL training, and even among teachers who faced more urgent infrastructural needs.

Hopefully, the widespread presence of this perspective indicates a shift not just among the attitudes of teachers, but also those charged with teacher training and educational policy-making, that will recognize the increasingly central role that MALL can play in both formal and informal learning, and will result in changes to teacher education and teacher professional development that will better equip and support language teachers in their efforts to make mobile learning a part of their teaching repertoires.

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