

Original Paper

An Exploration of MALL for Enhancing College Students' Oral English Proficiency

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Abstract

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as a promising tool within language education, presenting distinctive prospects for enhancing oral proficiency. This paper starts off by analyzing the current status of oral English learning among college-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China in such aspects as syllabus emphasis, classroom dynamics, examination focus, and language anxiety. It then shifts focus to MALL and its potential to enhance students' English speaking skills, particularly in a flexible and self-paced manner. Through a synthesis of existing studies and the proposition of effective pedagogical strategies, this paper seeks to elucidate the transformative capacity of MALL in reshaping oral English learning experiences within higher education contexts. Furthermore, practical recommendations for language educators, curriculum designers, and college students are provided to adapt oral English teaching methodologies, thereby fostering a more efficient and learner-centered language learning environment.

Keywords

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Oral English Teaching and Learning, College English

1. Introduction

Improving oral English is crucial for Chinese college students as it enhances their communication skills, facilitates international academic and professional opportunities, and fosters cross-cultural understanding. However, in the context of Chinese higher education, where conventional pedagogical approaches often prioritize rote memorization and written assessments over communicative competence and the traditional methods employed in classrooms frequently fall short of adequately equipping students with the necessary practice and real-world application opportunities for developing oral skills. This gap has prompted exploration into mobile-assisted language learning, which extends

learning beyond the confines of the conventional classroom setting. MALL breaks traditional decontextualized learning settings and time constraints while providing learners with a real-time authentic context with flexibility, accessibility, and individuality (Lee & Park, 2019). It made inroads into L2 research in the twenty-first century (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Liu, Lu, et al., 2016) and has received significant attention in factors affecting its use (Lai et al., 2018) and vocabulary acquisition (Chen, Liu, & Huang, 2019). Speaking, however, has received less coverage in this area (Hwang & Fu, 2019). To leverage the functions of MALL in promoting L2 speaking, the present paper seeks to explore its potential in solving the particular difficulties Chinese college students have in developing oral English proficiency. It aims to offer practical suggestions for educators to contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative pedagogical practices and their implications for global language education in the 21st century.

2. Challenges of Learning Oral English for College EFL Learners in China

English speaking ability is often regarded as the most challenging and deficient skill among Chinese college students. This difficulty can be attributed to factors operating at both external and internal levels, as identified in previous research.

Externally, many Chinese universities give more weight to grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension over speaking proficiency, leading to a disproportionate allocation of class time and resources. This imbalance leaves students ill-prepared for real-world speaking situations (Zhang, 2022). Moreover, large class sizes and traditional teaching methods prevalent in Chinese higher education often limit opportunities for meaningful oral communication practice. Consequently, interactive sessions and feedback from instructors are insufficient, hindering students' progress in speaking fluency and confidence (Dai & Wu, 2023). Additionally, English proficiency exams in Chinese universities predominantly assess reading, writing, and listening skills, with less emphasis on speaking abilities. This exam-focused approach encourages students to prioritize these areas to achieve academic success, neglecting their oral communication competence (Liu, 2017).

Internally, language anxiety and lack of motivation are another major challenges. Many Chinese students experience considerable anxiety when speaking English, particularly in front of peers, teachers, or native speakers. This fear of making linguistic mistakes and receiving negative evaluations diminishes their motivation to practice and adversely impacts their natural language acquisition process (Chen, 2024; Lin et al., 2019).

It can be concluded that the challenges in developing English speaking skills among Chinese college students arise from a combination of systemic issues within educational institutions and psychological barriers experienced by learners. Addressing these factors is crucial for enhancing students' oral communication abilities and fostering their overall language proficiency.

3. Features of MALL in Oral English Learning

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is the use of smartphones and other mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where portability and situated learning offer specific advantages. It represents a distinct evolution from Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) by leveraging personal, portable devices to facilitate learning anytime and anywhere, thus offering flexibility and accessibility that are otherwise constrained by traditional instructional methods (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Unlike CALL, which typically relies on fixed computer stations, MALL empowers learners to engage in continuous and spontaneous learning experiences across diverse contexts and has the potential to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning spaces (Lee & Park, 2019; Wong, 2013). This shift not only addresses the limitations of decontextualized learning environments but also liberates learners from the constraints of time-bound instruction, allowing for more personalized and adaptive learning experiences. Therefore, the adoption of MALL presents a transformative opportunity.

Central to the effectiveness of MALL in enhancing oral English proficiency is its ability to provide learners with authentic contexts that mirror real-life communicative situations. Research has demonstrated that exposure to authentic language use significantly boosts learners' motivation and enhances their self-regulation skills (Lin et al., 2019). By integrating adaptive materials and virtual environments that offer automatic feedback and real-time interaction for oral English practices, MALL bridges the gap between classroom learning and practical application. This integration not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters a more dynamic and learner-centered approach to L2 speaking acquisition. The following exhibits how MALL optimizes oral English learning through its distinctive features, catering to diverse learner needs and enhancing language acquisition outcomes.

3.1 Accessibility, Ubiquity and Flexibility

One of the key advantages of MALL is its accessibility and ubiquity (Sung et al., 2015). Learners can access language learning materials anytime and anywhere (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) through mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets. This flexibility allows learners to engage with English language content spontaneously, fitting practice sessions into their daily routines. Whether commuting, waiting in line, or relaxing at home, learners can seize moments to improve their oral skills through listening to podcasts, watching instructional videos, or participating in virtual speaking exercises. Moreover, MALL accommodates diverse learning preferences and goals by offering flexible learning paths and resources. Learners can choose from a variety of language learning apps, language exchange platforms, and online courses tailored to their specific needs and customize their learning journeys to align with their individual learning objectives and pace of progress. Hence, MALL is a promising tool for college students who are aware of taking the initiative to seek help from the outside world to improve their speaking skills at their own pace and demands, especially in out-of-class time.

3.2 Adaptive, Authentic, and Interactive Content

Effective oral English learning requires exposure to adaptive and authentic language materials that

reflect real-world language use. MALL platforms often incorporate adaptive learning technologies that personalize the learning experience based on individual progress and preferences (Hsu & Liu, 2023). Learners can receive tailored recommendations for language content that matches their proficiency level and interests, thereby optimizing engagement and motivation. Adaptive features also extend to constructive feedback mechanisms (Liu & Hwang, 2010), where learners can receive instant evaluations on their pronunciation or speaking exercises, gaining insights from others and facilitating continuous improvement in oral proficiency. Furthermore, the authentic and interactive nature of MALL enriches English-speaking learning experiences by offering multimedia content that stimulates multiple senses (Sun et al., 2017). Authentic audiovisual resources such as Podcasts, TED Talks, news broadcasts, discussion forums, and peer-to-peer language exchanges immerse learners in real-life language contexts with natural speech patterns, intonation, and colloquial expressions, fostering authentic language use and comprehension. Such interactions can promote L2 learners' communicative competence and confidence in using English orally in real-life contexts (Shadiev, Hwang, & Liu, 2018). These engaging content on various applications or learning sites on mobile devices not only sustains learner interest but also cultivates active participation in oral communication tasks, such as dialogues, role-plays, and virtual conversations with AI-driven language tutors to develop an ear for spoken English nuances and critical thinking, thereby improving their oral communication fluency and accuracy.

3.3 Motivational Mechanism and Progress Tracking

MALL incorporates motivational features such as gamification elements, reward systems, and achievement badges to sustain learner engagement and motivation (Chen et al., 2019). Interactive language challenges, virtual competitions, and goal-setting mechanisms incentivize regular practice and goal attainment in oral English learning. Besides, by transforming learning into a dynamic and enjoyable experience, MALL motivates learners to persist in developing their oral proficiency and achieve their language learning objectives effectively. Meanwhile, Learners can monitor their proficiency levels, track learning milestones, and identify areas for improvement through performance analytics and progress reports (Beatty, 2010). Automated assessments of speaking tasks, coupled with detailed feedback on pronunciation and language usage, empower learners to refine their oral skills systematically, measure their language proficiency growth, and build confidence over time.

In conclusion, MALL revolutionizes oral English learning by leveraging mobile technology to offer accessible, personalized, and engaging language learning experiences. Through its integration of authentic materials, collaborative learning opportunities, and motivational mechanisms, MALL empowers learners to cultivate oral proficiency, communicative competence, and cultural fluency in English, equipping them to communicate effectively in a cross-border society.

4. Affordances of MALL to address the existing issues

The features mentioned above hold promise for addressing the current challenges that Chinese college students face in enhancing their English speaking abilities. In light of the ongoing issues in English education at Chinese colleges, the next section examines the practicality and potential effectiveness of MALL's specific functionalities.

4.1 Lack of Emphasis on Oral English

MALL addresses the issue of uneven resource allocation in traditional language education, particularly the lack of emphasis on English-speaking instruction, by supplementing classroom learning with a variety of interactive and customized resources designed specifically for speaking practice. Compared to traditional methods alone, the adaptive, authentic, and interactive content provided by mobile applications and platforms can replicate real-life speaking scenarios, offering students a more comprehensive and engaging approach to improving their speaking skills. Integrating MALL into language learning curricula ensures students receive balanced exposure to speaking practice, which is essential for developing fluency and confidence in using the target language. By leveraging technology-enhanced learning environments, educators can boost student engagement and motivation, leading to more effective language acquisition outcomes.

4.2 Limited Opportunities for Oral Communication

As mentioned earlier, one of the significant advantages of MALL is its ability to facilitate asynchronous learning, enabling students to practice speaking at their own pace and convenience. Integrated virtual classrooms and discussion boards on MALL platforms foster peer-to-peer interaction and group discussions beyond traditional class hours. This flexibility extends the scope of speaking practice beyond physical classrooms, accommodating diverse learning schedules and preferences. Additionally, the asynchronous learning environments provided by MALL encourage students to engage in meaningful dialogues and collaborative activities, crucial for developing communicative competence. By promoting continuous interaction and discourse among learners, MALL enhances active participation, offers more practice opportunities, and deepens engagement with language learning content.

4.3 Uneven Exam-Focused Learning

To address the gap left by schools neglecting oral English training and learning in exams, MALL platforms offer specialized resources tailored for both formal and informal speaking contexts. These include oral dubbing, speaking practice tests, and feedback mechanisms. These platforms integrate modules that focus on enhancing speaking skills, encouraging students to invest time in improving their oral communication while preparing for language proficiency assessments and exams. Through targeted practice and immediate feedback on speaking performance, MALL enhances students' readiness and confidence in tackling exam-specific speaking tasks. This comprehensive approach not only supports academic success but also nurtures communicative proficiency crucial for practical language use in real-world situations.

4.4 Language Anxiety and Learning Motivation

Language anxiety frequently inhibits students from practicing speaking in traditional classrooms. MALL's motivational approach tackles this issue by creating a supportive, low-pressure environment where learners can engage in speaking activities without fear of immediate judgment. Integrated gamification elements and peer support networks enrich the learning experience, making speaking practice interactive, enjoyable, and less daunting. These features promote active participation and collaborative learning, reducing language anxiety and nurturing a positive approach to language acquisition.

Integrating MALL into language education offers flexibility, personalization, and expanded opportunities for English language learning, complementing traditional classroom methods for Chinese college students. By leveraging technology, students can enhance their oral communication skills while alleviating language anxiety. This holistic approach not only overcomes educational barriers but also fosters a comprehensive and balanced language learning environment. Ultimately, MALL represents a significant advancement in language education methodologies, harnessing technology to boost educational outcomes and cultivate linguistic competence among students.

5. Strategies to Improve the Application of MALL in Oral English Teaching and Learning

Incorporating MALL into oral English teaching can significantly enhance both the effectiveness and engagement of language learning for college students. For college English teachers, adopting MALL requires a strategic approach that integrates technology seamlessly into existing teaching practices. Some practical suggestions are as follows:

5.1 Suggestions for College Teachers

5.1.1 Integrate MALL Platforms in Daily Teaching Practices

College English teachers are encouraged to recognize students' challenges in oral English and enhance their digital literacy skills to effectively integrate MALL platforms into the curriculum. These platforms provide students with flexible and accessible resources, including audio, video, and text materials tailored to diverse learning preferences and abilities. During classes, teachers should design speaking activities that replicate real-world contexts to promote practical language proficiency. Activities such as role-plays, debates, and simulations immerse students in authentic communication scenarios, fostering engagement and skill development.

Beyond formal instruction, teachers should motivate students to utilize technology for speaking practice outside the classroom. Assigning speaking tasks via MALL platforms allows students to record themselves, receive feedback, and monitor their progress over time. Additionally, mobile assessment systems like automated speech recognition tools or video-based assessments can serve as valuable references for teachers in their daily oral English teaching efforts. By adopting these strategies, educators can effectively leverage technology to enhance students' oral communication skills and create dynamic learning environments conducive to language acquisition.

5.1.2 Promote Self-Regulated Learning

To unlock the full potential of MALL, fostering self-regulated learning awareness is crucial for college students engaged in independent study. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding students to autonomously manage their learning pace and prioritize areas of difficulty. This guidance involves teaching strategies to effectively utilize MALL tools, tailoring learning experiences to individual needs. By encouraging students to set goals, monitor progress, and adjust learning strategies accordingly, educators empower them to take ownership of their language learning journey. Additionally, integrating reflective practices can further enhance self-regulated learning. Periodic assessments of learning strategies and outcomes enable students to refine their approach to using MALL effectively. Teachers should also facilitate discussions on how students can leverage MALL features such as adaptive content and interactive exercises to maximize their learning benefits.

5.1.3 Language Anxiety Mitigation Strategies

The current challenges serve as a poignant reminder to educators of the psychological pressures students often experience when speaking in front of teachers or peers. Recognizing this, it becomes imperative for teachers to proactively employ effective strategies to mitigate language anxiety during speaking activities. One such approach involves integrating peer feedback mechanisms through MALL, wherein students provide constructive criticism and encouragement to their peers, fostering a supportive learning community. Additionally, gradual exposure to speaking tasks, starting with simpler and progressively more challenging activities, allows students to build confidence incrementally. Creating a supportive classroom environment is equally crucial. Teachers can cultivate a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment to reduce their anxiety levels. This holistic approach empowers students to navigate language challenges with resilience and self-assurance.

5.2 *Suggestions for Policymakers*

5.2.1 Prioritizing Oral English Learning and Assessment

To prioritize college oral English learning and assessment effectively, it's essential to strengthen support with robust policy frameworks advocating for technology integration. This involves developing policies that facilitate the seamless integration of MALL platforms into language education curricula. By incentivizing institutions to adopt innovative teaching methods like digital speaking tasks and multimedia-enhanced learning experiences, policymakers can create an environment conducive to improving language proficiency.

5.2.2 Empowering College Teachers with Technology Competencies

Establishing focused professional development initiatives for language educators is crucial. These initiatives should prioritize enhancing teachers' skills in technology integration and digital literacy. Workshops dedicated to utilizing MALL platforms, designing effective digital speaking exercises, and leveraging multimedia resources for language acquisition can profoundly empower educators. Collaborative efforts with educational institutions to offer ongoing training opportunities ensure that

teachers maintain proficiency in using technology to enhance oral English teaching strategies.

By aligning policy support with comprehensive professional development, educational stakeholders can effectively equip teachers with the necessary tools and skills to elevate the quality and effectiveness of college-level oral English education.

5.3 Suggestions for College Students

5.3.1 Take Ownership of Learning

College students should adopt a proactive approach to learning oral English. Utilizing MALL platforms allows them to self-assess their strengths and weaknesses in English speaking and establish personal learning goals. Seeking feedback from peers, language tutors, or instructors on MALL platforms or in real life provides valuable insights into improving speaking skills. It is advisable to use this feedback constructively to pinpoint areas for improvement and monitor progress over time.

5.3.2 Utilize Technology for Practice

College students are encouraged to take full advantage of technological resources for enhancing their oral English skills beyond the classroom. They can record themselves speaking English, engage with language exchange apps, and participate in online discussion forums to practice oral English in a low-pressure environment. Exploring a variety of resources on MALL platforms, such as podcasts, videos, and interactive lessons, allows students to experiment with different learning formats and discover what best suits their individual styles. Keeping abreast of advancements in language learning technology is essential. Exploring new apps, tools, or platforms that complement their oral English learning journey can significantly enhance their proficiency over time.

6. Conclusion

This paper explores how MALL can serve as a pivotal solution to the challenges encountered by college students striving to enhance their oral English proficiency in China. Currently, oral English teaching at the college level faces numerous obstacles, including limited opportunities for speaking practice and insufficient integration of technology into learning processes. By examining MALL's features—such as accessibility, ubiquity, flexibility, abundant authentic materials, collaborative learning opportunities, and motivational mechanisms—this study highlights its potential to not only address these challenges but also greatly enhance students' speaking skills. The suggestions put forward in this paper advocate for a strategic approach to leveraging MALL effectively. This includes integrating MALL platforms into the curriculum to provide interactive and engaging learning experiences, promoting self-regulated learning among students to foster autonomy and motivation, and utilizing technological tools specifically designed for oral practice. Moreover, the paper emphasizes the role of policymakers in supporting these initiatives through the development of policies that facilitate the seamless integration of educational technologies.

By implementing these strategies collaboratively, educational stakeholders can establish a supportive and conducive environment that empowers students to excel in oral English communication. This

comprehensive approach aims to bridge existing gaps in oral English teaching to enhance the overall learning outcomes in college settings across China.

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