

Editorial

Introducing the Special Issue: MOBILizing Language Learning in the 21st Century

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Mobilizing paraphrases as ‘making mobile’, alluding to people as well as resources being organized with a clear intent. What come to mind are military deployments and political rallies, but also crisis management programs and humanitarian relief efforts. At a physical level, a substance is mobilized when it can circulate as a liquid or through a liquid, such as certain hormones mobilizing energy reserves through the bloodstream. In sum, in order to render someone or something “mobile”, a dynamic force is required in order to alter a routine state of things and set these things in motion toward the attainment of a goal.

How to mobilize language learning is the scope of this Special Issue, its eight articles considering the impact of state-of-the-art technological advancements on language learning. The predominant target language is English (Burston et al. 2017; McSweeney 2017; Retorta and Cristovão 2017; Teeter 2017), but the learning of French (Liakin et al. 2017), German (Schenker and Kraemer 2017) and Turkish (Isbell et al. 2017) is also investigated. Learners in these studies are generally young adults, mostly undergraduates, who are studying English in Cyprus (Burston et al. 2017) and Japan (Teeter 2017), French in Canada (Liakin et al. 2017) and German in the U.S. There are also students learning English in a Spanish/English high school equivalency program in New York City (McSweeney 2017), as well as students learning English in a university-run program for the visually impaired in Brazil (Retorta and Cristovão 2017).

Underpinning these studies is the assumption that technology mobilizes language learning by optimizing it beyond the confines of a traditional classroom. The students in Schenker and Kraemer (2017) created oral projects using Adobe Voice (Adobe Systems Incorporated, San Jose, CA, USA), a storytelling iPad (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA, USA) application that enhanced oral practice outside the class, thus leading to beneficial effects on oral proficiency. The visually impaired students in Retorta and Cristovão (2017) used smartphones because of better screen readers. Despite heterogeneous levels of achievement, students learned how to operate smartphones for language learning and communication purposes, according to their various needs and goals. The model proposed by Burston et al. (2017) hinges on cloud-based resources to advance students to the level of independent users. McSweeney (2017) analyzed 44,597 messages and noticed that texting in English is linked to better academic English.

The studies underscore the limitations of a traditional language classroom, which are all too familiar: “too many students” and “too few teaching periods” are among the most recurrent complaints, coupled with “lack of authentic input” and “lack of student engagement”. Not to mention that outside the classroom there could be few or no opportunities to practice and learn. Technology represents a force for change in overcoming said limitations, providing opportunities for more exposure and more practice, with learners feeling more in control and enjoying themselves in the process. Liakin et al. (2017) analyzed students’ perceptions of using two mobile applications to improve French pronunciation. Students generally felt that both apps enhanced their practice as well as their confidence levels. Similarly, the students in Teeter (2017) reported increased linguistic self-confidence after practicing speaking with a shadowing technique on a mobile application.

Participants in these studies generally utilized tablets and smartphones to fulfill their tasks. Mobile devices exhibit well-known features such as cloud storage, computing, Internet connectivity, messaging, touchscreen, microphone, camera, text zoom, and geolocation. All of these features and even more are contained in lightweight, easily portable devices. The portability of the device together with its capabilities affords augmenting, contextualizing, audio and video recording, communicating, networking, just to cite some. Mobilizing language learning thus capitalizes on the many affordances of mobile technology, which enable learners to create their own learning environments “anytime anywhere”, as the slogan goes.

The “anytime anywhere” slogan espouses ubiquity and therefore ubiquitous technology, which may or may not be mobile. Citing relevant studies, [Burston et al. \(2017\)](#) point out that, given the type of assignment, students would normally prefer to use a computer with a large screen and physical keyboard in a quiet comfortable environment. Regardless of device mobility or immobility, ubiquitous access mobilizes language learning by providing learners with more options and resources at their fingertips.

The above studies indicate that learners utilize technology successfully to supplement and optimize language learning beyond their regular classes. However, there is one study in the Special Issue that stands out for being none of the above. [Isbell et al. 2017](#) relate the unsuccessful experience of three graduate students trying to learn Turkish ab initio relying solely on Duolingo, a self-directed CALL (computer-assisted language learning)/MALL (mobile-assisted language learning) language learning program. The researcher-participants kept logs and diaries to document their experience. Despite being connected to the Internet when using Duolingo, they had no opportunities for real communication in the target language. Furthermore, decontextualized exercises and aural drills led to persisting frustration and loss of motivation. Ironically, despite the label “computer/mobile assisted language learning”, this program provided very little assistance to these learners in their effort to learn a new language from scratch.

“Mobile-assisted language learning” and “MALL” are used consistently in the articles of this volume. Several authors ([Barcomb et al. 2017](#); [Isbell et al. 2017](#); [Liakin et al. 2017](#); [Teeter 2017](#)) mention MALL alongside CALL, as it is generally acknowledged that the former derives from the latter. Therefore, the term “mobile-assisted language learning” and its acronym MALL are historically precise in their reference to “computer-assisted language learning” and CALL. Furthermore, with the exception of [Isbell et al. \(2017\)](#), all the studies show how technology can successfully assist language learners. It makes sense to conceive of technology as an effective tool that assists its users in the fulfillment of a task, so much so that “assisted” can be safely assumed.

For the purposes of this Special Issue, “assisted” has been removed and a new acronym has been created for mobile language learning, namely MoLL. This shifts the emphasis to “mobile” as an intrinsic feature of language learning rather than an attribute of the technology used for that purpose. *Mobile* generally implies a spatial denotation when it refers to easiness of movement or transport. However, *mobile* can also mean ‘fluid’, e.g., a mobile liquid is a liquid that flows freely, and ‘changeable’, e.g., a mobile situation is an unstable situation; a mobile face is an expressive face. Language learning is a process, and as such it is fluid and changeable. It is mobile in its instability. In fact, stability in language learning can be considered an oxymoron. It has been shown that language learning can reach plateaus, but such stabilization can hardly be defined as language learning. In sum, a mobile language learner is a learner on the move not just because they learn a language with a mobile device “anytime anywhere”. A mobile language learner is a learner on the move because they keep their learning moving along in various environments, inside and outside the classroom, and through various resources, mobile and/or stable.

Language learning is on the move because it keeps happening. Technology plays a key role in keeping it happening and will continue to do so. However, technology, no matter how cutting edge, by itself may not be sufficient. In the studies presented here, the most successful outcomes combine in-class instruction with out-of-class supplemental practice with technology. Despite the limitations

mentioned above, the language classroom is essential in imprinting and structuring the learning. The teacher is at the heart of this process, providing guidance, support and feedback.

It is important to note that Barcomb et al. (2017) encourage teachers to overcome their technology-related anxieties and become more involved in the development of material for mobile language learning. In particular, the authors envision three overlapping levels of teacher involvement, from adapting premade resources, to customizing them, and finally to designing material to suit their own teaching contexts.

In conclusion, this volume on mobilizing language learning starts with a focus on technology, moves through language learning and ends with language teaching. Given their pedagogical expertise and their insights into the learner and the learning, teachers, more than engineers and developers, have a privileged vantage point that should be harnessed for the creation of mobile resources. Thus, in the final analysis, the mobilizing of language learning calls for the mobilizing of language teaching.

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