Chapter 9
Contextualized MALL in Target and Non–Target Countries: Mobile Activity Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is known to be conducive to contextualized language learning. However, the literature lacks an understanding of context. Nor is there a quantitative evaluation tool. The chapter’s dependent contextualized variables were the following: real-world context level (one’s place), real-life context level (one’s life), and device mobility (place diversity). The independent variables were target/non-target country (Taiwan/Israel) and language learning orientation (dedicated/generic). In the target country, the spoken language is the studied language. Dedicated/generic language learning orientation represents the existence/non-existence of pedagogy within activities. Fifty-three Chinese L2 students involved in 296 activities and 519 events were interviewed. Using device mobility and an evaluation index developed to measure real-world/real-life context levels, MALL was found more contextualized in Taiwan only in generic activities. The findings refine our understanding of the benefits of studying in the target country. The index can be used in future studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the orientation of language learning theories has changed from behaviourist and cognitive approaches to constructivist ones (Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, & Valentine, 2009; Wong, Chin, Tan, & Liu, 2010). One noticeable shift is toward social constructivist learning which suggests the importance of contextualised, situated language learning as a means to achieve goals, such as more meaningful learning (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009), or context-dependent vocabulary learning (Wong et al., 2010), among others.

With the emergence of mobile devices, it became apparent that Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) might be highly significant in contextualised learning. Mobile device portability enables learners to engage with contexts they find interesting, leading to a more personalised, meaningful, and deeper learning experience (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009). The distinction between MALL and previous Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) technologies is evident in MALL’s ability to support contextualised learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2012) suggests that mobile device portability offers specific advantages that allow interaction across different contexts. Specific examples of MALL’s contextualised learning affordances include location-specific language materials sent using radio-frequency identification (RFID) and Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, among others.

Given the advantages of contextualised language learning and the ability of mobile devices to support it, the importance of contextualised MALL is apparent. However, a review of the implementation case studies (Burston, 2013) found that the lack of consistent approaches to contextualised MALL and the lack of operative and quantitative ways to analyse, design and evaluate it are ongoing problems. Thus, a quantitative evaluation tool is required.

The study investigated contextualised learning in the mobile Chinese learning activities of students in two countries – Taiwan, where the Chinese language (learners’ L2) is the spoken language, and Israel, which is predominantly a Hebrew (learners’ L1) speaking environment. The study described here examined contextualised learning in MALL activities among students of Chinese using three main variables: real world context levels pertaining to one’s place, real life context levels pertaining to one’s life, and device mobility pertaining to place diversity. It used two additional variables that could be related to the application of contextualised MALL activities: target country (Taiwan/Israel) and language learning orientation (generic/dedicated). In the target country, Taiwan, where the Chinese language is spoken (target language), context opportunities are abundant, but mobile devices may provide alternative context opportunities in the non-target country where it is not (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009). Generic mobile materials such as social networks (Reinders & Pegrum, 2016) may provide learners with active platforms to create their learning content (Comas-Quinn et al., 2009; Reinders & Pegrum, 2016), related to the contexts they come across (Pegrum, 2014), Thus, these materials might be conducive to contextualised learning. On the one hand, it is questionable whether learners exploit their various available contexts as learning contexts; on the other hand, pedagogically dedicated, pre-designed learning materials (Reinders & Pegrum, 2016) are restricted in their ability to include situations (Reinders & White, 2010).

The purpose of this work was twofold. First, it aimed to devise a consistent approach to contextualised MALL and create an operative evaluation tool for the quantitative analysis of real world and real life contextualised MALL. Second, it aimed to explore target country and language learning orientation variables possible relation with contextualised MALL.