

# Current advances in providing social, mobile, and open language teaching to all

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The aim of this article is to analyse the recent development of an innovative inclusive paradigm for distance, social, and open second language teaching/learning, whose core is defined by mobile technology and Mobile Assisted Language Learning or MALL. This is intended to be the main way in which distance second language learners can interact and carry out their learning processes effectively, not an additional tool that can be used to perform a repertoire of tasks.

**Keywords:** second languages, pedagogical inclusion, mobile assisted learning, open learning, social learning.

*Avances en la enseñanza social, móvil y abierta para todos.* El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el reciente desarrollo de un innovador paradigma inclusivo para la enseñanza/aprendizaje de segundas lenguas a distancia, social y abierto, fundamentado en la tecnología móvil y el Aprendizaje de Lenguas Asistido por Móviles (conocido por sus siglas inglesas: MALL). Se pretende que este sea el principal medio para que los estudiantes de segundas lenguas a distancia puedan interactuar y llevar a cabo sus procesos de aprendizaje de forma eficaz, no una mera herramienta adicional que pueda utilizarse para realizar un repertorio de tareas.

**Palabras clave:** segundas lenguas, inclusión pedagógica, aprendizaje asistido por móvil, aprendizaje abierto, aprendizaje social.

## 1. Introduction

Assuming that the aim of language learning is communication, an issue that often takes on a practical dimension of extreme necessity for displaced people, it is reasonable to infer that it should involve considerable practice<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, since verbal communicative practice is intrinsically social, an important part of language learning must be undertak-

en with other interlocutors. Moreover, following this social constructivist approach which dominates language teaching methodologies today, the learner is expected to take an active role in his or her own learning. Since knowledge is generally self-constructed rather than transferred, learners require the opportunity to create strategies and connections that are meaningful to them, in an adaptive way, so that they can gradually take control of their own learning (Cuesta Medina, Anderson & McDougald 2017). However, given the intrinsically social nature of verbal communication, the research community highly values processes such as negotiating meaning and engaging in structured group work, which are often oriented towards the performance of practical tasks, such as participating, assisting each other and constructing and sharing new knowledge and skills (Warschauer & Kern 2000).

It should be mentioned in these preliminary reflections on language learning that languages have a dual nature as verbal communicative vehicles and also as rule-governed systems. After childhood, experts agree that individuals gradually lose some of their innate language acquisition skills and acquire a more rule-based cognitive profile. Therefore, adult second language learners, particularly those without strong self-regulatory mechanisms, as is the case for many human groups with uncertain access to education, are likely to benefit from the explicit model of learning, something partially based on face-to-face/textual/visual explanations with illustrative examples followed by some creative and engaging form of practice (Ellis 2015). It has been argued that part of this process will be more effective if done individually, particularly for improving certain language areas such as pronunciation or punctuation, as it provides the necessary flexibility and adaptation to personal learning styles, preferences, rhythms, and circumstances, however complex these may be, while enhancing the development of metacognitive and self-regulatory skills and processes (Read & Barcena 2014).

## 2. Distant language learning for all

Language learning in migrant groups is characterised by the prominent role of immediate needs and the lack of stability in the circumstances surrounding the subjects. Distance learning has been discussed in the specialized literature as a modality in which learners can effectively achieve a wide range of learning objectives (García Aretio 2017). Many authors, such as Hurd, Beaven & Ortega (2001) and White (2003), have published extensively on the feasibility of second language learning at a distance when continued attendance in face-to-face classes is not feasible, as is

often the case for the aforementioned groups. Subsequent research (e.g., White 2006; Moore & Kearsley 2011) has focused on gathering evidence and refining methods, practices and strategies for second language learning at a distance with multidisciplinary approaches and increasingly sophisticated designs and tools adapted to the complex profile of people in vulnerable situations, so that this kind of learning is now a recommended option more than a substitute or supplement.

There are multiple definitions and analyses of how the distance ‘component’ affects the way learners develop their linguistic-communicative competences. The most widely cited proposal is that of Keegan (1996), who points to three features of distance education that are key to language teaching and learning. Firstly, the physical separation of teachers and learners, which is accentuated in the case of displaced persons; secondly, the role of technology, which provides two-way communication and access to educational content in a flexible and immediate way; and thirdly, the structure of these studies, which is distinguished from others by its systematicity. Although a lot of research has been undertaken since this characterisation, as White (2006) points out almost two decades later, Keegan’s model is widely referenced in the literature on distance language learning (e.g., Boyle 1994; Fleming & Hiple 2004; Harrell 2008; Andrade & Bunker 2009).

There is a considerable body of research demonstrating that distance learning in general can produce similar, if not superior, outcomes to face-to-face classrooms (e.g., Reuter 2009; Hanover Research 2011). Some specific studies have focused on languages and the characteristics that make online courses effective for learning them. Don (2005) used data collected from a questionnaire given to participants in an online Spanish course, identifying the requirements for an inclusive distance second language course: clear instructions and documentation, effective communication among participants and between participants and their teachers, parallel and counterbalanced focus on different language processes (with an emphasis on orality) and audio-visual materials. Coryell & Chlup (2007) also used questionnaire data obtained from ESL learners in the United States using different software programmes, websites and learning platforms, and concluded that key elements of a well-functioning course include teacher training, the degree of collaboration promoted, and the nature of individual instruction and support provided. Vorobel & Kim (2012) analysed 24 articles from 2005 to 2010 on studies that compared face-to-face and distance language studies. The articles surprisingly include an equal proportion of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches and comparable achievements in terms of the effectiveness of the course in achieving its objectives, the coherence of its structure, learner satisfaction, the quality of pedagogy

used, and the presence of collaboration and assessment. Thus, while the results present in the literature support the use of distance language teaching over its face-to-face equivalent whenever necessary or even possible, it is worth arguing for further research to refine these findings, paying attention to the challenges of distance language teaching, such as interactivity and dropout.

The incorporation of online technology has made possible distance learning that is practical and abstract, exploratory, mechanical, interactive, and collaborative, and also adaptive (in pace and level) and personalised (according to interests and objectives). Through technology-mediated interaction, the development of so-called soft skills or social skills is possible, which, in turn allows for the personal and professional growth necessary in areas such as employability, social development, participation, change and adaptation (García, López, Molina & Morales 2016). This is in tune with the technological reality of groups such as migrants and refugees, who often participate in online social networks such as Facebook through their mobile phones to keep in touch with family and relatives. However, this online learning modality is not without its challenges. Durán Padilla & Reséndiz Rodríguez (2007) mention that, given that the learner does not have the emotional proximity of teacher and classmates, academic failure and dropout can occur if the learner falls into passivity and apathy. Furthermore, the most common problem is often related to technological failures, poor programme design, lack of robustness and inadequate software performance (Bates 2005). Social learning, in its broadest sense, refers to an open-ended, unstructured type of learning and is not necessarily bound by Social Learning Theory (Rotter 1945; Bandura 1977). Today it is often used in relation to the social networks that are part of Web 2.0 (a topic that has been addressed in the literature from complementary perspectives in works such as Downes 2005; Brown and Adler 2008; Li & Bernoff 2008; and Prensky 2009), but it is still linked to the idea of learning as a cognitive process that takes place in a social context, not necessarily physical, and that occurs by modelling, that is, by observing, imitating and or interacting with other people's behaviour, attitudes and models. As can be seen, social learning integrates elements of cognitive learning theory, focussing on cognitive factors, and behaviourism, which is based on the concept of responses to environmental stimuli.

The application of social, open, and massive online learning to second languages is recent and research highlights both success stories and challenges (Barcena, Martín-Monje & Read 2015). MOOCs represent a leading example of open education, although they are not the only form in which it has been implemented (bulletin boards, online communities, social networks, etc.). Open learning does not have a single, global def-

inition, but generally refers to a modality that is adopted because of the subject's needs, and is delivered in formats related to learning communities, MOOCs, and the use of open educational resources. Its special interest for displaced people lies in the fact that it usually takes place without legal or economic constraints, beyond the formal, regulated programmes of educational institutions, to which they probably do not have access.

The application of mobile technology to second language learning has several advantages and disadvantages. Regarding the advantages, firstly, it allows users to access learning activities anywhere and at any time, which is crucial for people on the move and in other time zones, allowing them to make the best use of time within their complex life situations. Secondly, this technology leads “naturally” to social learning, as geographically distant users can collaborate with their peers to interact, discuss, and learn. Thirdly, extending learning to activities that require the use of mobile devices can attract and maintain users' interest, since it provides them with opportunities to connect on a social level and the possibility to move away from the “academic” environments that can alienate certain groups of people. Fourthly, mobile devices allow users to work at their own pace and review materials if/when/where they want. Fifthly and finally, these devices support different learning styles, making it possible to learn by reading texts or watching videos, to give some examples. Regarding the disadvantages, firstly, the connectivity problems often experienced by mobile groups can limit the learner's ability to study online. Secondly, the small size of the screen may strain the user's eyesight after a prolonged period of time. Thirdly, the type of device and its underlying operating system condition the online materials and resources that can be used. More flexible devices tend to be expensive, as are the monthly data plans that must be paid for Internet access. These and other limitations, together with the large number of apps and the ad hoc way in which they are often used, have so far prevented MALL from playing a more prominent role in the field of inclusive second language learning.

### 3. Collaboration

Collaborative or social learning takes place through the interaction between peers and may or may not lead to a change in the attitudes and/or behaviour of the subjects. However, it is generally considered to be intrinsically linked to the socio-constructivist paradigm of learning, which although a general or interdisciplinary concept, is suitable for subjects such as language and communication, where performance is

eminently interpersonal (Wijayanti 2017) (see <https://www.techprevue.com/collaborative-learning-tools/> for a sample list of collaborative tools for teachers and learners). To be considered social, a process must, firstly, demonstrate that there has been a change in the knowledge or understanding of the individuals involved. Secondly, that this change goes beyond the individual learning with the teacher, or from materials, and is situated within wider social units or communities of practice through what are considered to be social relations, such as those of displaced people's own collectives, which are typically situated between personal or private and occupational ones (Reed, Evely, Cundill, Fazey, Glass, Laing, Newig, Parrish, Prell, Raymond and Stringer 2010). Social learning is historically linked to Computer Mediated Communication (Turoff 1991) from the 1980s and 1990s. Just as collaborative project initiatives between groups of native speakers of different languages have been unanimously praised (Thorne & Payne 2005), there have also been criticisms related to the informality or unstructured nature of the learning process. This can cause the most vulnerable participants to be less humanistic and critical in their thinking (Oppenheimer 1997), as well as, on occasion, to reach erroneous conclusions.

However, the vast majority of these courses are run on "closed" institutional platforms, where general open access is not possible. The Web has gradually evolved into a gigantic social infrastructure where most tools and services have a component that allows people to discuss or give feedback on what they are reading/using or provide links to major social networks where this can be done. The popularity of this infrastructure has led in an expected way to didactic applications. Gradually, online courses are starting to move away from closed platforms towards open ones, where social interaction between students has become a key element in the learning process. As awareness of the existence of such courses grows, the number of learners originally distanced from traditional academic forums, but now able to learn online, has increased dramatically. Thus, massive, open, social learning has become an educational phenomenon that is receiving increasing attention from the research community (Kop 2011; Gea, Montes, Rojas, Marín, Cañas, Blanco & Gutierrez 2013).

Social modelling has a direct application in education. If students see positive consequences of a particular type of behaviour (e.g., a peer who clarifies all their doubts through questions), they are more likely to repeat that behaviour themselves. Conversely, if the consequences are negative, they are less likely to perform that behaviour. Another reflection on this theory is that students develop self-esteem and awareness of their limits through constructive comparison and feedback, which is particularly relevant for those who have experienced challenging or

traumatic situations. Moreover, studies have shown that the social roles that are created (such as coordinator, monitor, etc.) are very positive for the learners with problems, who are more open and participative with their peers than with their teacher. This is also the case for the more advanced learners, who find the task of assisting their peers not only rewarding, but also an opportunity to refine and ratify their own knowledge and, obviously, for the teacher, who sees part of his/her burden lightened, especially in overcrowded courses.

## 4. Openness

Despite what some media have tried to convey to society, MOOCs represent a natural evolution of open educational resources (OER) (Barcena 2009). It was not until 2008 that Dave Cormier explicitly used the term MOOC to refer to a massive open online course (Siemens 2012; Watters 2012). Downes (2012) would later argue that MOOCs have unprecedented learning potential in that they allow large numbers of people to combine the advantages of open content with the concept of open learning - training and personal development. This educational modality attempts to promote learning for large numbers of people with a shared interest, removing the initial barriers to access and attendance and, in some cases, offering credits and/or certificates at a very low cost (or even for free) at the end of the course. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite the conflict of interests with the priorities of formal educational institutions, and the many criticisms raised about them in the literature (Romeo 2012; Jackson 2013), MOOCs are having a significant impact on the hundreds of thousands of people taking these courses around at any given time. These courses have also given rise to a large field of international research, where the author has been working for some time. Therefore, despite some unmet expectations and the low completion rates, considerable interest in the field still prevails, as evidenced by the growing number of such courses and their followers worldwide.

Several factors are responsible for making MOOCs in general, and LMOOCs in particular, both possible and popular for displaced people (see <https://www.my-mooc.com/en/categorie/foreign-languages> for a varied sample of language MOOCs). Firstly, widespread access to the Web has become a reality, even in many (though not all) disadvantaged parts of the world. Secondly, a large percentage of these people are not fortunate enough to be able to afford the usual tuition fees. Such a complex modality could not exist without challenges, including the size of the student body (which makes it difficult to handle and manage, e.g.,

how to provide feedback and scaffolding), problems of attribution of authorship of an assessment, and the high dropout rate, particularly among those with more objectifiable difficulties (Read 2014). In addition, Barcena & Martín-Monje (2014) have also discussed their difficulties, such as the changing role of teachers in LMOOCs (where they move from being instructors to facilitators, so they cannot interact in a personalised way with the majority of enrolled students), the aforementioned problem of how to provide effective feedback with such an unbalanced teacher-student ratio, and the difficulties of managing a highly heterogeneous group, composed of individuals with different levels of linguistic-communicative competences (in the case of LMOOCs). However, second language learning is an eminently practical and dynamic process and, as such, lies at the heart of the suitability scale for this open teaching modality.

The experience being gained by academics working on the design and development of inclusive LMOOCs (such as Open UNED's Spanish for Immediate Needs) is refining the concept empirically, discriminating what is more effective for the students. The results of this analysis include the average number of hours that a course should last to make it useful and engaging, the definition of prototypical learner traits that can be considered in the course design process, and the most appropriate assistive technology. In conclusion, enrolment figures, demographic studies of their population and satisfaction surveys show that LMOOCs are very popular (Martín-Monje, Bárcena, & Read 2013). It can be argued that the popularity stems in part from the lack of associated cost and the flexibility of access and engagement they offer. Unlike other OER-related initiatives, they represent comprehensive and guided learning. Furthermore, the social orientation of most of these courses is also stimulating and rewarding for learners (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich 2011).

## 5. Mobility

With the advent of the smartphone and the development of open mobile operating systems such as Android, there has been a “democratisation” of such devices. Also, the reduction in the price of mobile devices means that even the most disadvantaged sectors have access them. As Evans (2014) points out, “The world is mobile!”, a claim supported by a multitude of data such as the approximately 5000 billion smartphones and tablets sold by the end of 2016 (compared to approximately 3500 billion desktops and laptops), the 115 billion app downloads on iOS and Android devices (see <https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/best-language-learning-apps/>), one of many websites with the best



and latest learning apps). Of these, the most popular category is social networking, with people spending a third of their mobile device usage time connecting with one of these, and it is the top mobile use among displaced people, ahead of information search.

Looking at the mobile device and app usage data outlined above, it is easy to see the relevance that networked mobile devices can have for inclusive learning and to aspire that through their use a huge number of people who do not have access to other technological equipment can access learning. They represent an important step towards ubiquitous access to information and, as such, will in the short-term condition the ways in which online education, which learners are beginning to explore, can be undertaken. This is not about researchers trying to draw people into Web 2.0 environments from their mobile devices, because they can already see the benefits. This is a bottom-up revolution, where learners themselves are pushing their teachers, not the other way around. This change in habits reflects basic human behaviour: if we are used to using a tool for one purpose, we will inevitably try to use it for others. In the case of displaced people, this means that, regardless of their willingness to use mobiles for learning, and the intrinsic qualities of these devices to do so, it is up to the teacher to extend their learning time through acts relevant to their daily lives, adapting content and methods to the realities and usage needs these people have. The concern for compatibility and ubiquity in mobile learning has already led to the creation of a line of research aimed at exploring how to ensure such uniformity, which has been called Mobile Seamless Learning (MSL), whose application to languages has been analysed by Wong, Chai, Chin, Hsieh and Liu (2011) and to LMOOCs by de Waard, Keskin & Koutropoulos (2014), both with promising results.

## 6. Conclusion

The paradigm proposed here builds on the well-established and standardised role of technology in distance learning and its potential for inclusive second language learning. The use of mobile devices here offers three benefits for social and open language learning, which can complement the experience. Firstly, it allows learners to pursue their studies in a flexible way, making the most of the time they have available as they move from place to place every day. This access, in itself, will promote frequent interaction and, in the process, communication and collaboration. The students do not need to wait to have a computer at hand, but can check to see if, for example, another colleague has commented on something they have said in a forum or social network. Secondly, modern smartphones provide an enriched way for students to interact with the world around

them, recording sounds and language, taking pictures, getting geographical data, etc. (e.g., find a certain type of object, take a picture of it, tag the parts of the object in the picture, and upload it to the course for their peers in order to continue the same activity). Thirdly and finally, modern mobile devices are themselves powerful little computers based on an extensible application architecture that can provide general tools to complement open social language learning, either as part of a course or as some kind of complementary activity (Godwin-Jones 2011).

The state of development of MOOC platforms for mobile deployment has been summarised by de Waard (2014). Given the widespread adoption of mobile devices, it is only a matter of time before most, if not all, of the major MOOC providers prepare their courses and related tools in mobile mode. This is becoming increasingly evident with new collaborative projects starting to emerge, such as the EdX partnership with Facebook for mobile course access in Africa. Other more recent initiatives, such as Indian My Open Courses, were mobile-friendly from the start. Even MOOC platforms that do not support mobile access can offer content and resources to be downloaded indirectly to a computer and then transferred to a mobile device. It should also be noted that, given the wide range of mobile 2.0 compatible tools that are available these days, it is questionable whether a true MOOC platform is really necessary to offer social and open learning to students these days. It seems to be the case that social, massive, and open language learning supported by mobile technology adds enough elements to make language learning an effective process, and a meaningful experience, following an approach that integrates these elements. In the emerging debate around the adaptation of LMOOCs to a mobile format, the logic has been identified that if there are learners doing a course, they will try to use a mobile device (which they will no doubt be using for other purposes) to continue this activity where possible (Kukulska-Hulme, Traxler & Pettit 2007; Pettit & Kukulska-Hulme 2007). This premise is implicit in much of the research being carried out on MALL.

The theoretical basis of the paradigm presented in this article aims to take advantage of the linguistic, methodological, and technological configurations of social and open learning resources and tools specifically adapted for distance language learners at risk of exclusion. This approach incorporates mobility and mobile devices into the configuration of an innovative learning paradigm. Furthermore, the backbone of this paradigm is defined by mobile and MALL technology, not only as an additional tool that can be used to perform certain tasks, in a loosely structured or controlled way, but as the main support or vehicle from which these users can interact and carry out their distance learning effectively.

It has been argued here that mobile devices can complement inclusive, social, and open language learning in three main ways. First, they can pro-

vide access to learning resources and other online learners “anytime-anywhere”. This access offers the possibility of a model of interaction and communication that replicates a real-world reference and immersive learning modality in a previously unheard-of way, including casual knowledge acquisition. Secondly, mobile devices have a wide range of sensors that can be used in an easy and intuitive way to interact with the real world. This allows learners to extract activities from the online environment and incorporate them into everyday life, where, moreover, information and interaction can be recorded for later reintroduction into the online world as resources for learning activities. Alternatively, online learning outcomes can be used as scaffolding resources for activities that an individual may need to carry out in the real world. Indeed, the literature has spoken of the dual role of mobile technology as both an assistant and a tutor to the second language learner (Sharples 2000). Thirdly and finally, the app culture associated with mobile devices provides a valuable set of programmes to complement previous online activities. In addition to general apps that can be useful in supporting learning, many of which are free, the author argues that MALL practices should be closely integrated with open and social language learning in order to diversify and optimise their potential. Some incipient work has already been done to apply mobile devices to specific tasks within social and open online learning processes for second languages. However, no systematic and grounded use of them as a cornerstone for such learning has been made to date, as the author here proposes.

The hypothesis underlying the intention to explore an innovative paradigm of inclusive social and open second language distance learning, whose backbone is defined by mobile technology and MALL, is that the social and open didactic dimensions, with a structure defined by mobile technology and MALL practices, can be integrated into a single modality for the effective development of linguistic-communicative competences at a distance (Barcena & Read 2015; Read, Barcena & Kukulska-Hulme 2015). The modality resulting from the intersection of these three dimensions would have a synergistic effect from a Kuhnian perspective, i.e., in the interpretative framework of today’s horizontal, fluid, connected and coordinated knowledge societies. In these, it would also provide, together with the agency of displaced people and their changing contexts and situations, the blurring of the boundaries of learning with those of their real lives towards greater linguistic immersion.

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## Notas

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