How to Teach Language with Mobile Devices

In this chapter, we’ll look at a series of *how* questions, considering how language teaching has changed over the years in relation to CALL and MALL; how different kinds of MALL can be put into practice; and how MALL can be assessed. In the following chapter, we’ll approach MALL from a different angle as we turn to *what* questions and consider what aspects of language – including mobile language – can be taught through mobile devices.

**Where language teaching meets technology**

Technologically mediated language teaching, whether in its CALL or MALL incarnations, is profoundly affected by theories and approaches which derive from studies of second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics. The past half century has brought about dramatic changes, as Carla Meskill and Natasha Anthony (2010) point out:

> The historical shifts away from teaching language in the abstract to teaching language *in use* have been significant. Where language was once treated as a subject area, the substance of which was to be *talked about*, contemporary views see the goal of language instruction to be active, productive *use* of the new language.

(Kindle location 429; italics in original)

As they go on to say: ‘Contemporary language learning is…about productive, socially motivated language *use* as a route to mastery’ (Kindle location 4586). It’s possible to identify a progression over time through several major language teaching approaches and their CALL and MALL
manifestations, leading towards today’s views on how best to teach and learn language.

An older *behaviourist approach* can still be found in some parts of language teaching generally, as well as in so-called ‘tutorial CALL’ and ‘tutorial MALL’. This gives rise to repetitive drilling of vocabulary, spelling, grammar and pronunciation, aiming at consolidation of foundational knowledge through flashcard exercises, quizzes or simple games. Many teachers agree that such activities have a place in the classroom, especially if they include a focus on meaning, and even more so outside the classroom in flipped models. However, these activities are pedagogically limited since they do not typically involve real comprehension or communication, so they cannot be the whole story of language learning (Dudeney et al., 2013).

The *communicative approach* arose as the result of a shift towards a cognitive perspective, as Noam Chomsky’s work on language performance and language competence, and Dell Hymes’ subsequent work on communicative competence, led to a much greater emphasis on communicative proficiency (Meskill & Anthony, 2010). Several interrelated points of emphasis emerging from cognitive and psycholinguistic research have proven to be of considerable significance and are often referenced in the literature on communicative CALL and MALL, sometimes singly but more often in combination (e.g., Blake, 2008; Nah et al., 2008; Reinders & Wattana, 2012). These include the need for:

- *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 1985), which involves language that is slightly beyond learners’ current level but can still be comprehended, providing them with material for intake;
- *noticing* (Schmidt, 1990), which involves learners attending to, or having their attention drawn to, new elements of language like grammar or vocabulary, which can then become intake;
- *negotiation of meaning* in the process of interaction (Long, 1996), which assists with comprehensible input, provides negative feedback that helps learners notice gaps in their grammar, vocabulary and other areas, and encourages them to modify their language output;
- *comprehensible output* (Swain, 1985), which involves learners testing out new grammar, vocabulary and other aspects of language as they generate linguistic output.

This opens up space for the computer-mediated communication (CMC) tasks often associated with CALL and MALL. In CMC, learners can also begin to develop their pragmatic competence, that is, their ability to