

# Using Mobile Technology in Teaching Grammar in Higher Education Institutions: The i-MoL Tool

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## Introduction

**Today's** students are vastly different from the way they were a few decades ago. According to Eaton (2010), today's students are tech-savvy. They can access a world of resources and information just at their finger tips. They are the creators, not simply consumers, of technology.

In line with such tech-savvy and worldly attributes, the field of English language education has witnessed rapid changes in teaching methodology, material development, and assessment. Traditional beliefs and practices of language teaching are giving way to newer, more innovative ways of teaching. Old, authoritative, "teacher-centred" approaches to teaching are giving way to more collaborative and interactive approaches.

Mobile technology presents an alternative approach to knowledge transfer which may be used in educational trainings to the community. The educational use of such technology can help to enhance the skills and competencies of the English language among learners at all levels in the community.

## Mobile Technologies for Grammar Learning

Saadiah (2013) highlighted that among the challenges of transferring English knowledge in this country is to find the best approach to teach English to multilingual students. Classroom-based training is one of the common traditional knowledge transfer methods involving individuals who want to accelerate learning on particular subjects (Piktialis & Greenes, 2007). However, the traditional methods may not be enough in teaching English language.

A good English proficiency comes from good grasp of grammar. To conquer the problems of low English proficiency among Malaysians, it is important to identify the key motivators that could facilitate the process of grammar learning. In this digital age, technology can play a very important role and mobile technology could be one of it.

The utilisation of mobile technologies in education is generally called mobile learning, or simply m-learning. M-learning is introduced globally as a flexible learning approach nowadays. M-learning takes learning to individuals, communities and countries that were previously too remote, socially or geographically, for other types of educational initiative (Traxler, 2009). M-learning in Malaysia is still in its infancy (Issham & Rozhan, 2009). However, Siraj (2004) estimated that Malaysia has a huge potential to implement mobile learning in its curriculum.

Mobile-based approach to teaching and learning of English grammar is unique in that it allows the language learners to benefit the learning process in ubiquitous and more personalised manner. This approach can also enrich, enliven, or add variety to the conventional method of grammar learning as it is digitally designed, flexible and mobile - i.e., anytime and anywhere.

## Intelligent Mobile Learning Tool for Grammar Learning: the i-MoL

The "Linguistic Pocket Education" mobile learning project in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) revealed that teaching grammar via SMS may be a possible pedagogical tool which will offer benefits to students (Munir, Amelia, Issham & Siti Nur Afifah, 2012). Students were found to be highly motivated and demonstrated positive attitudes toward SMS-based grammar learning. However, students were reported to face some challenges pertaining to SMS limitation that hinders successful learning. Munir et al. (2012) therefore suggested that students need to have more fun and interactive mobile learning features for them to learn grammar effectively.

As an extension of this SMS-based learning project, i-MoL is thus proposed as an alternative 'on-the-hand' approach to teaching and learning of English Grammar. The term 'i-MoL' is coined to express the mobile concept of grammar learning. The 'intelligent' part of the proposed model lies in its ability to create a personalised grammar learning environment for the learners. Specifically, personalisation in this context refers to the provision of learning contents that are tailored to suit each learner's learning style. In this regard, the proposed model is equipped with a mechanism to firstly model learners' learning styles and then adapt the grammar learning content to each type of learning style.

Through the i-MoL model, a mobile learning system is to be developed as a tool to facilitate a seamless ubiquitous learning environment for grammar learning. The system will include several mobile-based applications for grammar learning including notes, alerts, query, quizzes, polling, and forum.

This i-MoL project intends to design and develop a more advanced and diversified approach to pedagogical use of mobile devices for English grammar. This is in line with the advancement of mobile technologies, proliferation of mobile phone ownership in Malaysia (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2011) and increasing significant mobile learning projects among Malaysian scholars (Mariam & Woollard, 2010).

i-MoL is thus seen as an innovation in mobile learning that supports grammar learning through cross-platform user interface, i.e., from low-end to high-end mobile platform, including Android, iPhone, and basic mobile phones with SMS and MMS capabilities. By exploiting these various mobile platforms, i-MoL aims to provide a personalised and flexible learning environment to facilitate learners in learning grammar.

### How i-MoL Benefits the Community

Proficiency in English is vital in today's competitive world. Malaysians need to have a grasp of grammar as it is important and highly required for them to perform most daily activities, especially for communication purposes.

i-MoL offers a ubiquitous way to support language learners to learn English grammar through mobile phones. Since i-MoL is accessible through the most basic mobile technologies, it has the potential to benefit a wide range of community, especially those who live in geographical areas with limited access to Internet. Studies show that mobile phone ownerships per 100 inhabitants in Malaysia is approximately 143 percent while broadband is only 22 percent (MCMC, 2013).

Hart (2007) also explained that, a good English language instructor must be able to tailor the learning materials to suit students' needs. Thus, unlike the traditional methods, i-MoL can help to foster the creation of learning communities and provide new methods for grammar learning knowledge transfer. This adaptive approach enables i-MoL to accommodate the needs of diverse learners.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) which seek to carry out community engagement activities related to English language proficiency may adopt the i-MoL as a virtual language training. In order to make i-MoL accessible to the wider community, HEIs initially can impose a zero-subscription fee to users. This would allow everyone to benefit from the skills and knowledge imparted through the i-MoL app.

### Conclusion

Mobile phones are now becoming people's most trusted personal device and are receiving much attention by scholars, particularly for educational researches. For this reason, it seems like a natural progression to introduce such ubiquitous technology to benefit the community of language learners. The i-MoL provides learning contents that are adaptive to learners' learning styles. It is believed that the i-MoL will be able to address many needs of a wider and more diversified community not just in learning English grammar, but also other skills and competencies.

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