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Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in EFL: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has become an important approach in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because smartphones and mobile applications can support learning beyond classroom time and location. This review synthesizes published review-level evidence on the effects, instructional uses, challenges, and research limitations of MALL in EFL contexts. The study uses a structured narrative review of accessible systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and pedagogical framework studies published between 2021 and 2025. Sources were selected when they focused on mobile-supported language learning and reported findings relevant to EFL outcomes, implementation, or instructional design. The reviewed evidence indicates that MALL can support EFL achievement, particularly vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Meta-analytic studies report positive overall effects, including Hedges' g = 0.88 for mobile language applications and d = 0.91 for MALL interventions targeting EFL proficiency. However, the certainty of evidence remains limited by high risk of bias, short intervention periods, limited random allocation, and few delayed post-tests. MALL should be used as a pedagogically designed complement to classroom teaching rather than as a replacement for teachers or conventional instruction. Effective implementation requires clear learning objectives, active practice, feedback, teacher support, equitable access, and valid assessment. This review is interdisciplinary because it connects applied linguistics, educational technology, instructional design, and digital equity.

Keywords
Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Educational technology, Mobile learning, EFL, Systematic review.

Introduction

Over the past decade, smartphones, mobile apps, wireless connectivity, and digital communication tools have reshaped how learners access educational content. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, this shift matters a great deal. Mobile technologies allow learners to remain in contact with English long after the classroom session ends, enabling them to access vocabulary drills, listening exercises, video clips, dictionaries, pronunciation tools, quizzes, and communication platforms whenever their schedule permits. For EFL learners, whose contact with English outside formal lessons is often limited, this on-the-go access can serve as a valuable supplement to classroom instruction.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, or MALL, describes the use of portable digital devices to support language learning. In practice, MALL covers a wide range of tools, including smartphones and tablets, mobile apps, messaging platforms, voice recorders, online dictionaries, and mobile-friendly learning management systems. What distinguishes MALL from the older computer-assisted language learning tradition is its portability, flexibility, and capacity to adapt to the learner's life rather than requiring the learner to adapt to a fixed location or schedule. Learning no longer has to wait for a particular room or a particular hour (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Stockwell, 2022).

As MALL has gathered momentum, researchers have started to ask critical questions about what it actually delivers. Does it improve proficiency, motivation, participation, or learner autonomy? Recent systematic reviews paint a cautiously optimistic picture: MALL appears to support vocabulary acquisition, grammar work, reading comprehension, listening, speaking, and overall learner engagement (Burston, 2015; Sung et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2020). Still, those findings deserve careful interpretation. Mobile-learning studies vary widely in participant characteristics, intervention duration, instructional methods, apps used, and outcome measures. Many existing studies are also weakened by methodological issues such as small samples, unclear participant allocation, short intervention periods, and a shortage of follow-up assessment (Mihaylova et al., 2022; Burston & Giannakou, 2022).

The educational value of MALL does not come from the app itself. What determines the outcome is how the technology is woven into pedagogy. Wang et al. (2024) argued that mobile-learning research needs stronger pedagogical foundations, because technology should serve learning goals, not the other way around. MALL is best understood as a teaching and learning approach rather than simply as using a smartphone in class. This systematic review examines the evidence on MALL in EFL education and is organized around four research questions. First, what learning outcomes have been reported for MALL in EFL contexts? Second, which language skills does MALL most often support? Third, what challenges tend to get in the way of successful MALL implementation? Fourth, what can EFL teachers, institutions, and future researchers take away from the existing evidence?

Concept of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

At its core, MALL is about using portable digital technologies to support language learning. That support can take many shapes: teacher-designed learning activities delivered through mobile channels, self-directed study via apps, or informal exposure to English through digital media. What ties all of these together is a handful of defining features: portability, connectivity, accessibility, personalization, and immediacy (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Stockwell, 2022). What makes mobile devices especially useful is that they travel with the learner. A student can work on English at home, in the library, on a bus, or during a quiet moment at work. Someone might run through a flashcard deck on vocabulary, queue up an English podcast, record themselves practicing pronunciation, or swap messages with classmates between classes. Small moments like these, scattered through the day, add up to considerably more English exposure than a learner would otherwise get.

Wang et al. (2024) suggest that effective MALL pedagogy needs to keep three things in view: the learner, the device, and the teacher or content. Learners vary in their digital literacy, language level, motivation, learning preferences, and even in whether they have a device they can rely on. Devices themselves differ in screen size, internet access, storage, accessibility features, and day-to-day dependability. Teachers, meanwhile, have to pick the right content, design meaningful activities, give useful feedback, and evaluate whether learning is taking hold. Pulling all of this off takes more than just downloading an app; it requires careful alignment between technology, pedagogy, content, and what learners actually need.

MALL and Vocabulary Learning

Among the areas MALL researchers have studied, vocabulary comes up most often, and for good reason. Mobile devices are unusually well suited to vocabulary work because the activities are short, repeatable,

and easy to slot into spare moments. Learners can work through flashcards, listen to pronunciations, study images, read example sentences, take quizzes, and use spaced-repetition routines, all from a single app.

Mihaylova et al. (2022) ran a meta-analysis of mobile language-learning applications and found that these tools had a moderate-to-strong positive effect on second-language achievement when compared with control conditions. Their pooled effect size came in at Hedges' g = 0.88. Vocabulary was one of the most frequently measured outcomes in the studies they reviewed. Earlier meta-analyses by Mahdi (2018) and Lin and Lin (2019) similarly reported medium-to-large effect sizes for mobile-assisted vocabulary learning, reinforcing the conclusion that mobile tools can be effective for this skill.

Why does mobile vocabulary learning seem to work? A few reasons stand out. To begin with, mobile devices make it easy to revisit the same words repeatedly, which is essential in vocabulary acquisition. Apps can also give learners immediate feedback, so mistakes do not go uncorrected for long. On top of that, learners can dip in and out during short pockets of free time, and apps can pair written words with sound, images, and contextual examples, which helps words stick. The catch is that vocabulary apps are most useful when they push learners toward active recall and meaningful use rather than rote memorization (Stockwell, 2022).

MALL and Reading Comprehension

Mobile technology has plenty to offer reading comprehension as well. Digital texts, built-in glossaries, multimedia support, on-tap dictionaries, annotation tools, and interactive questions can all lower the friction of reading in a second language. When a learner hits an unknown word or a sentence that will not parse, the answer is often a tap away. Li (2022) carried out a meta-analysis on the effects of MALL on EFL and ESL reading comprehension, drawing on 20 effect sizes from 17 experimental and quasi-experimental studies published between 2000 and 2020. The overall effect was significantly large, suggesting that MALL applications can outperform more traditional approaches for reading comprehension. Li also found that the setting of the intervention and how long it lasted were significant moderators of the effect. Taken together, the evidence suggests that mobile reading activities tend to work best when they are tied to clear learning goals. A useful pattern is to have students read a short digital text before class and then use face-to-face time for discussion, interpretation, and application. That said, reading tasks should not lean entirely on screen-based access. Teachers need to keep an eye on learners' reading habits, screen fatigue, the quality of internet access, and the overall quality of the digital materials themselves.

MALL and Other Language Skills

Beyond vocabulary and reading, MALL has been put to work on listening, speaking, grammar, and writing. Mobile devices can hand learners audio recordings, videos, subtitles, pronunciation models, voice-recording tools, messaging platforms, and grammar exercises, often in the same app ecosystem. Putri (2025) reviewed ten empirical studies published between 2019 and 2024 and found that MALL supports vocabulary, listening, speaking, and grammar learning. The review also pointed to a less obvious benefit: MALL can nurture learner autonomy, because students are free to access materials and practice at their own pace. The mechanics differ a little from skill to skill. For listening, mobile tools let learners replay audio and slow things down when they need to. For speaking, learners can record themselves, listen back, and get feedback from teachers or peers. For grammar, apps can deliver practice exercises and immediate corrective feedback. For writing, mobile platforms can support short written responses, collaborative discussion, and peer review. The toolkit is broader than it might first appear. The catch is that the evidence is not evenly distributed across skills. Vocabulary and reading have attracted a great deal of research, while longer-term evidence for speaking, writing, pragmatics, and communicative competence remains thinner. That imbalance is itself a useful finding; it tells us where the field still has work to do, particularly on the productive and interactive side of language.

Challenges of MALL

For all its promise, MALL brings real challenges. The first is unequal access to technology. Not every learner has a recent smartphone, a stable internet connection, enough mobile data, sufficient storage, or a quiet place to do listening and speaking work. When institutions do not step in with alternatives, mobile learning can quietly widen the gap between students who have plenty of access and those who do not. A second challenge is distraction. The same device that holds a learner's vocabulary app also holds their messages, games, and social media. Notifications, in particular, have a way of pulling attention away from the task at hand. Teachers can help by giving clear instructions, setting realistic task durations, and sharing practical strategies for managing attention. A third challenge is teacher preparation, and it goes deeper than learning how to use the technology. Teachers need to know how to pick the right mobile tools for a given goal, connect those tools to learning objectives, give feedback that actually helps, handle privacy concerns, and judge whether the learning is taking hold. Chengli (2025) points to technical issues, teacher training, learner readiness, pedagogy, and institutional support as the main factors that make-or-break MALL implementation. None of these can be solved by the app store alone.

Method

Research Design

This study used a structured narrative review design. It synthesizes accessible review-level evidence on MALL in EFL, including meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and a pedagogical framework study. The purpose was not to calculate a new overall effect size but to examine what recent scholarly syntheses report about the effects, uses, challenges, and limitations of MALL. The review was guided by the reporting principles of PRISMA 2020, which provides guidance for transparent reporting of systematic reviews, including clear eligibility criteria, explicit selection procedures, and accurate reporting of methods and findings (Page et al., 2021).

Selection Criteria, Search Strategy, and Data Extraction

Sources were selected when they met the following criteria. They focused on mobile-supported language learning. They addressed EFL, ESL, or broader second-language learning findings relevant to EFL. They were systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or pedagogical framework studies. They provided enough methodological or results information for accurate synthesis. They were published between 2021 and 2025.

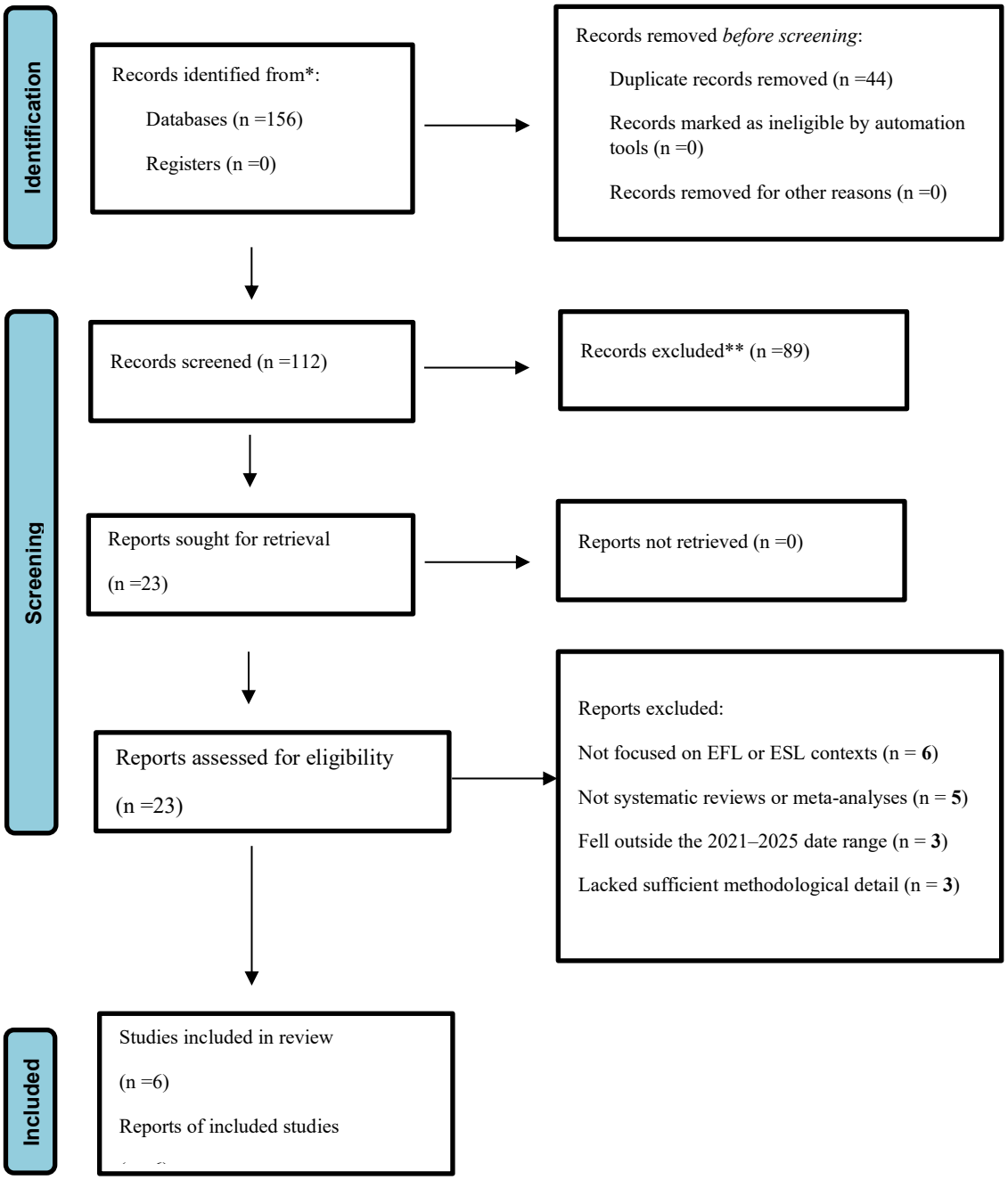
A systematic search was conducted in January 2025 across four electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search used Boolean combinations of the following keywords: ("mobile-assisted language learning" OR "MALL" OR "mobile learning") AND ("English as a foreign language" OR "EFL" OR "ESL" OR "second language") AND ("systematic review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "review"). The search was limited to publications appearing between 2021 and 2025. No language restrictions were applied beyond the requirement that sources report their findings in English.

The initial search retrieved 156 records across the four databases. After removing 44 duplicates, 112 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 89 were excluded because they were not review-level studies, did not focus on language learning, or did not address mobile-assisted instruction. The remaining 23 records underwent full-text assessment against the eligibility criteria.

Seventeen were excluded because they were not focused on EFL or ESL contexts, were not systematic reviews or meta-analyses, fell outside the date range, or lacked sufficient methodological detail for accurate synthesis. This process yielded six review-level sources for inclusion: Chengli (2025), Li (2022), Mihaylova et al. (2022), Putri (2025), Wang (2023), and Wang et al. (2024).

Information was extracted from each selected source on the following areas: type of study; scope and purpose; number of studies or effect sizes, where reported; language skills or outcomes examined; main findings; reported moderators; reported methodological limitations; and pedagogical implications. The review used narrative synthesis because the included sources differed in their populations, target skills, mobile tools, research designs, and statistical methods. No new meta-analysis was conducted.

Figure 1. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram summarizing the screening and selection



Limitations

This review is not a new exhaustive systematic review of all primary MALL studies. It is a review of accessible review-level evidence. Therefore, it does not report fabricated screening numbers, invented participant data, or new statistical estimates. Some included reviews may also contain overlapping primary studies. For this reason, the findings should be understood as a cautious synthesis of the current review literature rather than independent confirmation from separate datasets.

Findings and Discussions

The reviewed literature includes meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and a pedagogical framework study. Taken together, these sources examine mobile applications, mobile learning interventions, reading comprehension, tertiary EFL education, and MALL implementation.

Table 1. Summary of the Included Review-Level Evidence

Source	Study Type	Scope	Main Reported Finding
Mihaylova et al. (2022)	Meta-analysis	Mobile language-learning applications	Reported a pooled effect of (g = 0.88) with high risk of bias and low certainty of evidence
Li (2022)	Meta-analysis	MALL for EFL/ESL reading comprehension	Reported a significantly large overall effect; setting and duration were significant moderators
Wang (2023)	Meta-analysis	MALL and EFL English proficiency	Reported a random-effects effect size of (d = 0.91)
Putri (2025)	Systematic review	EFL studies published from 2019 to 2024	Reported support for vocabulary, listening, speaking, grammar, and autonomy
Chengli (2025)	Systematic review	Tertiary EFL education from 2015 to	2025 | Identified opportunities and barriers related to pedagogy, access, teacher preparation, and institutional support
Wang et al. (2024)	Pedagogical framework	MALL design and implementation	Emphasized learner, device, and teacher/content factors

RQ1: What learning outcomes have been reported for MALL in EFL contexts?

Taken as a whole, the evidence points in a fairly clear direction: MALL can support EFL achievement. Mihaylova et al. (2022) reported a pooled effect size of Hedges' g = 0.88 for mobile language applications, a moderate-to-strong positive result against control conditions. Wang (2023) reached a similar conclusion in a meta-analysis of MALL interventions aimed at EFL learners' English proficiency, with a substantial overall effect size of d = 0.91. That study drew on 25 effect sizes from 25 studies published between 2015 and 2021, and it flagged significant differences tied to learners' majors, language-learning objectives, and the type of instrument used to measure outcomes. Li (2022), focusing specifically on reading comprehension in EFL and ESL settings, found a significantly large overall effect across 20 effect sizes from 17 experimental and quasi-experimental studies, with intervention setting and duration both emerging as meaningful moderators.

Put side by side, these findings suggest that MALL can genuinely move the needle on language learning outcomes. They also show, just as clearly, that the size of that movement depends on context. Learner characteristics, learning objectives, how long the intervention runs, the type of instruction, and the measurement instrument all shape the picture. MALL is not a single, uniform intervention; it is a family of approaches, and how well any one of them works depends on where and how it is used.

RQ2: Which Language skills does MALL most often support?

Vocabulary dominates the MALL research landscape, and for practical reasons. Mobile applications are well suited to vocabulary work: flashcards, quizzes, audio pronunciations, images, example sentences, and repeated review are all easy to deliver on a phone screen. The portability of smartphones means learners can squeeze in vocabulary practice during the small pockets of time that would otherwise go to waste. This concentration of research is consistent with earlier meta-analytic findings by Mahdi (2018) and Lin and Lin (2019), who both identified vocabulary as the most frequently studied outcome in MALL research.

Reading comprehension is the second most-studied area, and the supporting toolkit is wide. Mobile texts, digital glossaries, annotation tools, and multimedia resources can all help learners work through written English more confidently. That said, mobile reading tasks need to be designed with care; poorly structured activities invite superficial reading and the kind of distracted skimming that does not really build skill. Listening tends to draw on podcasts, short videos, songs, dialogues, and replay able audio materials, all of which let learners control the pace of their input. Speaking benefits from voice recording, pronunciation applications, peer interaction, and short oral assignments. Grammar work is often delivered through quizzes, corrective feedback, and personalized practice. Writing can be supported through mobile discussion forums, short written responses, collaborative documents, and peer feedback. Across all of these, the through line is the same: the device follows the learner, and learning can happen in shorter, more frequent bursts than the traditional classroom allows.

RQ3: What challenges tend to get in the way of successful MALL implementation?

The positive findings come with important caveats. Mihaylova et al. (2022) noted a high risk of bias and low certainty in the studies included in their meta-analysis. Only five of the 23 studies explicitly reported random allocation, and only three included delayed post-tests. Those numbers matter. An immediate bump in performance after a short mobile intervention is encouraging, but it does not tell us whether the gains hold up weeks or months later. Without delayed testing, it is hard to say whether learners are actually retaining vocabulary, grammar, reading skills, or other language gains over time or simply performing well in the moment. Most of the evidence comes from tertiary education and from vocabulary-focused interventions, which means comparatively little is known about how MALL works in primary and secondary schools, in lower-resource settings, or in under-researched areas of language such as speaking interaction, writing development, pragmatics, and broader communicative competence. The field has built a strong foundation in some places, but the map is far from complete. Beyond methodological limitations, implementation challenges persist. Unequal access to devices and connectivity remains a barrier. Distraction from non-learning apps and notifications undermines focus. Teacher preparation is often insufficient, and institutional support is sometimes lacking. Chengli (2025) emphasizes that technical issues, teacher training, learner readiness, sound pedagogy, and institutional backing are the factors that determine whether MALL succeeds or falters.

RQ4: What can EFL teachers, institutions, and future researchers take away from the existing evidence?

MALL as a Pedagogical Tool

What the evidence really tells us is that MALL can be useful in EFL education, but it is not a magic fix. A mobile device on its own does very little. Learning improves when the technology is tied to clear objectives, meaningful practice, timely feedback, and steady teacher guidance, and it falters when it is not.

Consider a vocabulary application. An app that asks learners to actively recall words, listen to pronunciations, study contextual examples, and revisit items on a spaced schedule is doing real work. An app that only asks learners to recognize a word as correct or incorrect is doing much less, even if the screen looks the same. The same logic applies to speaking: a voice-recording task only supports learning if learners receive useful feedback and are pushed to use the target language in a meaningful exchange. The lesson is that teachers should pick mobile activities based on the learning outcomes they actually want, not on what is most convenient to assign. A workable pattern might look like this: a short mobile vocabulary review before class, pair or group communication work during class, and a brief mobile reflection or voice-recording task after class. Stitched together, those moments create a real connection between independent practice and classroom interaction.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers are well served by starting with the skill they want to develop and only then choosing a tool. Mobile activities should be short, purposeful, and visibly connected to course content. Active learning should be the default: vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation recording, short listening tasks, peer feedback, grammar practice with explanation, and writing tasks that ask for revision. Passive scrolling, copying, and clicking are not, on their own, evidence of learning. It is also worth being explicit with learners about the habits that make mobile learning work. Many students will benefit from practical guidance on managing their time, handling distraction, protecting their privacy, and using technology responsibly. That can mean encouraging students to turn off notifications during focused study, to organize their study time, to evaluate online content critically, and to be careful with personal information. These are not add-ons; they are part of what makes MALL work in the first place.

Implications for Institutions

Institutions should resist the assumption that every learner arrives with the same device, the same data plan, and the same quiet place to study. Practical accommodations matter: low-bandwidth materials, offline options, printable alternatives, and accessible design features. Where MALL is required for a course, students with limited access should be offered realistic alternatives, not just told to make do. Equally important is professional development for teachers. Useful training goes well beyond how to operate a given application. It should cover instructional design, feedback strategies, assessment, accessibility, privacy, and learner support. Without that broader preparation, even the best-equipped school can end up with technology that goes unused, or worse, used badly.

Implications for Future Research

If MALL research is to mature, the methods have to get stronger. That means being explicit about how participants are assigned to groups, how long the intervention lasts, which mobile features are actually being used, how teachers support the work, and how outcomes are measured. Delayed post-tests should become routine, not the exception; they are the only way to know whether learning has actually stuck. The field would also benefit from sharper comparisons. Comparing all technology against no technology rarely tells us much. What is really needed are studies that contrast specific approaches with each other: a spaced-retrieval vocabulary routine against simple exposure, for instance, or teacher-guided mobile speaking activities against independent app practice. Those are the comparisons that move the field forward.

Finally, the evidence base needs to widen. Most of what we know comes from tertiary settings and relatively well-resourced contexts. More research is needed in school-level EFL classrooms, in rural areas, in low-resource environments, and with learners who have very different levels of digital access. Long-term studies of speaking, writing, pragmatics, and broader communicative competence are especially thin on the ground, and they are exactly the areas where MALL is most often talked about and least often measured.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here suggests that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning has real potential in EFL education, but that potential is contingent on how it is designed, implemented, and supported. The meta-analyses and systematic surveys examined in this paper lean positive, particularly for vocabulary and reading comprehension, and other studies point to benefits in listening, speaking, grammar, motivation, engagement, and learner autonomy. Yet these gains are not automatic. They depend on instructional quality, teacher preparation, equitable access, and sound assessment. Where those conditions are weak, the results tend to be weak as well. The evidence base itself also has clear limits. Many studies are short-term, run on small samples, give little information about random allocation, and rarely include delayed post-tests. That makes it difficult to say with confidence whether the gains hold up over time. The field's center of gravity also sits firmly in vocabulary research and tertiary education, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of other skills, age groups, and settings.

Looking ahead, stronger research designs, longer follow-up periods, more diverse learner populations, and closer attention to under-researched skills such as speaking, writing, and pragmatic competence would all move the field forward. In practice, MALL is most effective when it is woven into a well-planned EFL curriculum rather than bolted on as an extra. Mobile technology can extend learning beyond the classroom walls, but meaningful progress still requires active practice, useful feedback, genuine interaction, thoughtful teacher support, and equitable access for every learner.

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