**University of Alberta**

Exploration of Using MALL to Help English Learners in China Overcome Foreign Language Anxiety and Improve Their English Communicative Competence

by

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Abstract

Driven by globalization, a vast population in China is studying English. English training has become a multimillion-dollar industry not only for public schools and universities but also for private language training schools and individuals (Bolton, 2002). However, the traditional English teaching methods have produced results that are not satisfactory. For example, the term “dumb English” was created to describe Chinese learners’ low English communicative competence in the 1980s and 1990s (Hu, 1988; Weng, 1996). In addition to producing low communicative competence, the traditional methods in China have also resulted in foreign language anxiety (FLA). Therefore, it is necessary to consider other teaching methods and tools.

Combining the characteristics of today’s learners who are heavily dependent on mobile devices with research on using mobile devices in language teaching, I explore the potential of integrating Mobile-assisted-language-learning (MALL) in English teaching to improve communicative competence while also addressing FLA. In this paper, I will present a literature review focusing on the following key areas. First, I review the literature on current English teaching issues in China (i.e. Foreign Language Anxiety and low communicative competence). Then, I present previous research about MALL, analyzing its effectiveness in English teaching. Next, I explore the connections between the effectiveness of MALL, FLA and Communicative Competence. Finally, I synthesize these areas by discussing the potential of MALL in overcoming FLA and the low communicative competence.

*Keywords*: Foreign Language Anxiety, Low Communicative Competence, English as a second language, English as a foreign language, China

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Exploration of Using MALL to Help English Learners in China Overcome Foreign Language Anxiety and Improve Their English Communicative Competence

# English Teaching and Its Issues in China

Driven by globalization, a vast proportion of the population in China is studying English. English is a language that “achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal, 2003, p.2). English training has become a multimillion-dollar industry not only for public schools and universities but also for private language training schools and individuals (Bolton, 2002).

Although the Chinese government has made substantial efforts to improve English teaching and learning, the results are not satisfactory. For example, in order to improve learners’ English communicative competence, the Chinese government has reformed English pedagogy several times. During these reformations, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced nationally. The goal of CLT is to help learners acquire language ability that enables them to communicate effectively in authentic contexts. Despite the introduction of CLT, many teachers still tend to use old fashioned English teaching methods (Scrivener, 1996). Traditional English teaching consists of a variety of approaches, including “the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, which are characterised by systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary, painstaking efforts to form good verbal habits, an emphasis on written language, and a preference for literary classics” (Hu, 2002, p.2).

However, the traditional English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) teaching and learning in China seems unsatisfying. For example, the majority of Chinese students learn to communicate in “Chinglish” which refers to “Mandarin sprinkled with English or English with Mandarin-induced syntax” (Wolff, 2009, p. 9)

What is worse, even today the term “deaf and dumb English” is still being used in China to describe Chinese language learners’ low communicative competence in English (Lo Bianco, Orton, & Yihong, 2009). It is said that for learners who are not majoring in English their aim of learning English is only to have enough ability to finish their work, instead of having adequate communicative competence (Yi'An Wu, 2001). Also, it is believed that traditional teaching methods have failed to develop Chinese English learners’ capacity to use the target language in authentic contexts (Hu, 2002).

Both low communicative competence and inability to use English in authentic contexts result in Chinese English learners’ unwillingness to speak English and their reticence. One reason for Chinese English learners’ silence may be their Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Liu and Jackson (2008) conducted a study on 547 first-year non-English majors in China and revealed that the majority of participants were not willing to speak English publicly in class; instead, they preferred to be involved in private interpersonal interactions. The study also found that participants’ unwillingness to speak was attributed to different reasons, such as their low self-rated English proficiency and their chances of speaking English. If they have a low self-rated English proficiency, they become anxious when speaking publicly and avoid speaking in class. If they have more opportunities to have interpersonal conversations with their friends, they become more prepared to speak English and less anxious. More than one third of participants indicated that they were afraid of tests, negative evaluation, and of speaking publicly. Similarly, He (2013) explored reasons behind Chinese learners’ unwillingness to speak, and concluded that Chinese learners’ Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) is a significant reason. Another reason behind the unwillingness to speak is that our old English teaching methods failed to cultivate English learners’ communicative competence (Yi'An Wu, 2001).

# Definition of Communicative Competence in English

The theory of Communicative competence was first postulated by Hymes (1972). The term is used to describe speakers’ ability to use speech properly in different situations. Savignon was the first to introduce this notion into a foreign language learning context, defining communicative competence as “ability to function in a truly communicative setting- that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors” (1972, p.8). Savignon (1982) identified the following characteristics as elements of communicative competence. First, communicative competence depends on dynamic negotiations between two or more people sharing the same language. It should be developed through personal interaction. Second, communicative competence depends on people’s cooperation. Third, she says that communicative competence is context-based, which means it is not fixed and changes all the time. Canale (1983) proposed four components of communicative competence: 1. Grammatical competence (i.e. grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling); 2. Sociolinguistic competence (i.e. the ability to apply grammatical competence properly in a specific context); 3. Discourse competence (i.e. the ability to integrate language into a certain type of text, such as poetry); and 4. Strategic competence (i.e. the ability to use both verbal and non-verbal strategies to communicate effectively).

However, despite efforts to understand communicative competence and to use this concept as the basis for language education, the result has been learners’ low self-rated proficiency, their unwillingness to speak, and FLA. Therefore, it is necessary to make some modifications to current approaches to English teaching in China in order to find solutions to help learners improve their communicative competence and overcome their FLA. Since communicative competence is a broad concept (Canale, 1983), I will primarily focus on grammatical competence, which in Canale’s framework includes vocabulary. Without grammar and vocabulary, people can express nothing (Wilkins, 1972). Therefore, both grammar and vocabulary are crucially important in language learning.

# Personal Connection: Frustration and Anxiety

I started to learn English when I was 10 or 11. Since I have always been fascinated by western cultures, such as Hollywood movies and pop music, I chose English as my major in university. Altogether, I received formal English instruction for almost 12 years, from grade four to the end of my undergraduate degree. After I graduated from university, I decided that I wanted to teach. I have now been teaching English for almost 8 years, and I like the feeling of teaching, especially when my students tell me that they are making progress. Even though I have been learning and teaching English for nearly 20 years, I still experience anxiety and frustration when speaking English, and these feelings became stronger after I came to Canada. I have reflected on my experience in order to understand the reasons behind my feelings.

When I was a student, the way that English was taught at school was old fashioned. We first learned vocabulary, then read or recited passages from textbooks, followed by grammar practice and reading comprehension. The last step was to take an exam. Since I learned this way from the very beginning, I did not think there was anything wrong with this method, until the first time I took the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). During the speaking test, I was intimidated and I could barely speak. I also made many grammatical errors. The strange thing was that I definitely knew that some of my responses were grammatically incorrect, but I still made mistakes. Not surprisingly, I did not achieve a satisfactory score on my first IELTS speaking test.

Many years later, I observed the same phenomenon in my students. When it came to speaking, they were either too nervous to speak or made numerous mistakes, resulting in their reluctance to speak in public. What’s worse, they made so many mistakes that I could hardly understand their speech. The conclusion that I drew from both my own and my students’ failures was that because we barely had the opportunity to speak English, we were either unconfident or hesitant when speaking English. Also, we had never learned to negotiate meanings in a real English conversation. Now, I understand that our lack of confidence and hesitation were an indication of low communicative competence.

From my previous experience as both an English learner and an English teacher, I believe that the ultimate goal of learning a new language is to acquire high communicative competence. My own experience leads me to think that due to antiquated teaching approaches and the limitation of using only textbooks to teach English, Chinese English learners’ communicative competence is not being well developed.

# Purpose and Rationale

Based on the limitations of English teaching in China and my own experience as both an English teacher and learner, I believe that in addition to conventional teaching methods and paper-based teaching materials, teachers should be open-minded to using a wider range of methods and resources. During the process of choosing teaching methods and resources, taking learners’ intentions and aims into consideration is essential. When teachers are designing tasks for learners, they should always be attentive to consistently changing situations and dynamically adapt their teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2006). According to Selinker (1972), language learning and teaching should always consider individual differences as an important element. However, English teachers in China continue to use methods, such as grammar translation, which ignore learners’ intentions, aims, and individual differences. In order to improve English teaching in China, English teachers have to consider their students’ characteristics when choosing teaching methods and resources.

One important characteristic that teachers need to consider is that today’s learners are a new generation, which is fascinated by technology. Most of them are heavily dependent on mobile devices. Therefore, considering the advantages of using mobile devices in language development, I propose to integrate mobile devices into mainstream English teaching.

Therefore, my project takes the form of a literature review, focusing on integrating mobile devices into mainstream English teaching and the potential of this integration to overcome FLA and increase learners’ communicative competence. I propose that this integration of mobile devices into conventional English teaching can be a solution for improving learners’ communicative competence and reducing FLA. In the following sections, I will elaborate on FLA and current research on Mobile-Assisted-Language-Learning (MALL).

# Conceptual Framework

Definitions of Important Terms**:**

Before exploring how to use MALL to help learners overcome their FLA, the first step is to clarify some important definitions. Key concepts include Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and its three components (i.e. communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation), as well as MALL.

FLA is a specific anxiety that is related to foreign language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined Foreign Language Anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.128).

FLA has three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (1986). Communication apprehension is the fears and anxieties that are connected with an on-going communication or an expected communication (McCroskey, 1977). Test anxiety is anxiety related to test performance, and oral tests are believed to be the most anxiety-provoking. For instance, students may complain that they actually grasp a certain grammatical rule, but forget it when taking tests. This forgetting can be blamed on the challenge that students have to remember several grammatical points at the same time. Also, it can be blamed on students’ nervousness facing the exam. What is worse, if students realize that they are not competent enough to avoid the mistakes, their anxiety may be intensified (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The third component of FLA, fear of negative evaluation, refers to “apprehension about others’ evaluation, distress over their negative evaluation, avoidance of evaluation situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (Watson & Friend, I969, p.449). Based on the definition of FLA and its three components, it is argued to be situation-specific and closely related to interpersonal interaction (Horwitz et al., 1986). Since interpersonal interaction is important in today’s globalized world, it is necessary to find ways to overcome FLA.

The Effects of FLA**:**

A great deal of research has been conducted, exploring different aspects of FLA, such as reading, writing, translation, and speaking anxiety. One finding from this research is that FLA is extremely pervasive among language learners. Worde (1998) estimated that one-third of language learners experienced FLA. Horwitz (2000) also found that a similar proportion of university students in the US had different levels of FLA, from moderate to severe. Research has also suggested that FLA influences Foreign/Second language acquisition in different ways. Although Alpert and Haber (1960) claimed that FLA could be both facilitative (i.e. improve performance) and debilitative (i.e. hinder learners’ achievement), other research has shown that high level FLA influences language learning negatively (e.g. MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991).

Zheng (2008) surveyed empirical research and found five effects of FLA on second/ foreign language learning. First, high FLA may contribute to low language proficiency (Young, 1991). That is to say when FLA is decreased, language proficiency will be improved. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that one solution to improve learners’ language proficiency is to lower their FLA. Conversely, FLA can decrease when learners accumulate more experience and have higher proficiency (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Second, learners with high FLA may be more likely to refrain or stay away from interpersonal communication. Third, FLA can interfere with learners’ ability to process input. This idea is based on Krashen’s hypothesis (1982) that FLA acts as a filter, blocking individuals’ information processing systems, thereby influencing the speed of language acquisition. Fourth, FLA may affect learners’ language output. For example, language learners tend to be calm when doing a drill in foreign language classes; however they are more likely to “’freeze’ in a role-play situation” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p.126), not knowing how to properly speak their foreign/second language, or they tend to make more errors (Gregersen, 2003). The presumed reason for this “freeze” is that learners’ cognitive resources are limited. Sometimes, due to their nervousness, their cognitive resources will be overtaxed. As a result, an insufficient amount of cognitive resources can be utilized in processing task-relevant information (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Last, the unpleasant feelings brought by FLA may lead to learners’ low self-esteem, which may lead to more serious anxiety. Therefore, to optimize English teaching, language teachers should be aware of this issue and find solutions to help learners overcome their anxiety.

In other research exploring FLA’s influence, Abu-Rabia (2004) found that high levels of anxiety can result in an increased occurrence of spelling mistakes. Hauck & Hurd (2005) found that language anxiety can even negatively influence language learners interacting in online contexts.

How to Measure and Identify FLA**:**

Because of the widespread influence of FLA, it is vital to recognize it. With respect to measuring levels of learners’ anxiety, Horwitz et al. (1986) made an important contribution by designing a scale based on a self-report and clinical experience, called the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). Based on her research, Horwitz claimed that “results to date suggest that foreign language anxiety can be reliably and validly measured and that it plays an important role in language learning” (Horwitz, 1991, p. 39). Moreover, Zheng (2008) identified three important methods used by researchers to measure language learners’ FLA, namely behavioural observation or rating, physiological assessment and self-report. These three methods can be used together effectively. The instruments proposed by Horwitz et al. (1991) and Zheng (2008) could potentially be used by teachers to identify FLA in class. But while instruments can provide teachers with valuable information, they also take time to administer. Therefore, the observation of students’ behaviour may be more efficient for identifying and assessing FLA in classrooms.

It is widely believed that learners who suffer from FLA may exhibit some common behaviours which are relatively easy for teachers to identify. First, learners with FLA are passive in participating in classroom activities (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). For instance, they may sit in the back. Second, they are less likely to volunteer answers or to participate in oral classroom activities (Ely, 1986). When called upon by teachers, they may speak very quietly or just stay silent. Third, they are sometimes absent from classes and delay their homework (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002). Fourth, they may avoid using complex structures, such as grammatical patterns in foreign languages (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). In many situations, learners may only use one or two words to answer an open-ended question and avoid further elaboration. These clues sometimes can be helpful for teachers to identify learners who are anxious in class and then help them.

Existing Theories and Empirical Research on Sources Contributing to FLA.

A necessary step to reduce language learners’ FLA is to explore the reasons behind it. A body of research has used a variety of different methods, such as interview and diaries, to explore reasons causing FLA. Young (1991, p.434) argued that FLA is a complicated phenomenon, “depending on ethnic background, prior language experience, learner personality”. Therefore, Young categorized six potential interrelated sources of FLA. They are (1) personal and interpersonal anxieties, (2) learner beliefs about language learning, (3) instructor beliefs about language teaching, (4) instructor-learner interactions, (5) classroom procedures, and (6) language testing. These six areas are described in more detail in the paragraphs that follow.

**1.** Personal and interpersonal anxieties**.** Personal and interpersonal anxieties are a common source of FLA. Personal anxiety is related to learners’ low self-esteem, and interpersonal anxiety mainly results from over-competitiveness among peers. With respect to self-esteem, it is primarily caused by comparison with their peers. Learners who have low self-esteem tend to have higher anxiety levels (Young, 1991). Even worse, Price (1991) found that a large proportion of her participants have a belief that almost all their classmates are more proficient in language skills than themselves. This is probably why many learners experience FLA.

**2.** Learners’ beliefs about language learning**:** The success of language learning is closely related to learners’ beliefs. Horwitz (1988) generalized five common beliefs held by language learners. First, some language learners believe that the accuracy of their utterance is the most important thing. Second, some consider accent to be important. Third, some consider language learning to be language-to-language translation. Fourth, some think that it only takes a two-year period to become sufficiently fluent. Last, some believe that other learners are born with a stronger aptitude for language acquisition than others. However, it is obvious that some of these beliefs are unrealistic, or vary from context to context. For example, if people consider a two-year period long enough to become fluent, it is likely that they will fail to reach this goal, and may become frustrated as well as self-doubting, causing anxiety to appear (Young, 1991).

Gregersen (2003) found a relationship between learners’ beliefs and their FLA: highly anxious learners consider avoidance of making mistakes their goal, whereas non-anxious ones consider effective communication as their goal. Similarly, Gregerson and Horwitz (2002) found that perfectionists who hold unrealistic beliefs and people who have anxiety may share many common characteristics. Both of them are more likely to be reticent and to be reluctant to speak in class, and they tend to wait until they are completely sure about their expressions. Therefore, learners’ beliefs about language learning can contribute to FLA.

**3.** Instructor beliefs about language teaching**.** Young (1991) summarized several common mistaken and anxiety-provoking beliefs held by language instructors First, a large proportion of instructors consider “a little bit of intimidation a necessary and supportive motivator for promoting students' performance” (Brandl, 1987, p.50). However, from students’ perspective, this kind of intimidation may contribute to anxiety. Also, some instructors believe that what language instructors should do is to identify and correct students’ mistakes. If instructors use harsh manners to correct mistakes, learners may become anxious. Third, some instructors feel that they are responsible for most of the talking in a language class, and they should avoid students’ group work due to its uncontrollability. Last, some instructors believe that “their role is more like a drill sergeant's than a facilitator's may be contributing to learner language anxiety” (Young, 1991, p. 482).

**4.** Instructor-learner interactions**.** When instructor-learner interactions are mainly about methods that instructors take to correct learners’ mistakes, FLA can occur (Young, 1991).

**5.** Classroom procedures**.** One of the most anxiety-provoking procedures is believed to be speaking publicly in front of both teachers and peers, such as doing presentations in class and being called upon to answer questions without preparation (Young, 1991).

**6.** Language testing**.** Anxiety produced by language testing most often occurs when students are facing something novel or unexpected in a test (as cited in Young, 1991). For example, students spend hours preparing for a test, and find that the material and question-types are different from what they have prepared (Young, 1991).

Some more recent research on sources of FLA can be categorized in three perspectives: (1) language learners themselves; (2) language teachers; and (3) culture.

**1.** From the perspective of language learners themselves**.** Language learners themselves are an important factor of their FLA.For example, language learners’ low foreign language proficiency can prevent them from communicating in a second or foreign language context, due to the fear of losing face (Zhao, 2007). Compared to non-anxious learners, anxious language learners are more likely to avoid language learning activities in order to preserve their social image by minimizing the possibility of making linguistic errors publicly (i.e. in front of peers and teachers). However, taking language-related risks is necessary for language improvement (Dornyei, 2009).

Ely (1986) found that students who were willing to take risks in language classes have higher participation, and this higher participation can lead to more accurate oral expression. Similarly, Samimy and Tabuse (1992) found that in Japanese learning classes the more risks students are willing to take, the higher grade they acquire in exams. Hence, this face-saving strategy taken by language learners themselves may hinder their progression.

A second aspect of language learners themselves is learners’ inability to automatically achieve connection between words and their meanings (Huang, 1998). When anxious, learners can experience difficulty in producing language with automaticity and spontaneity. When this inability is combined with their fear of losing face, it can foster more severe anxiety.

A third aspect of language learners that can cause anxiety is a lack of strategies, such as listening strategies, insufficient class preparation, and poor questioning skills (Huang, 1998; Noormohamadi, 2009; Zhao, 2007). In research on learners’ use of strategies, Chen (1990) found that learners who have high-proficiency can better use strategies, compared to low-proficiency learners. This creates a vicious circle for low-proficiency learners: the lower the proficiency and the fewer strategies they have, the more anxious they become.

Fourth, Sparks, Ganschow, and Javorsky (2000) proposed a cognitive deficit hypothesis. They suggested that it is due to a subtle cognitive-linguistic disability. But Horwitz (2000) argued that while a small proportion of people may have such a problem, there are many people suffering from anxiety, which is the most common psychological phenomenon. Thus, it seems unreasonable to say that such a large number of people all have a linguistic disability. Consequently, this hypothesis needs further research. Last, Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley (1999) found that younger students were more likely to suffer from FLA, so age may be connected with FLA.

**2.** From the perspective of teachers**.** FLA has also been discussed in relation to teachers and how they approach their role in teaching. First, teachers’ rate of speaking can lead to learners’ incomprehension of class content and contribute to learners’ anxiety (Zhao, 2007). Second, a learning environment that focuses heavily on reading and writing can contribute to FLA because language learners hardly have opportunities to speak English (Zhao, 2007). This lack of experience can lead to learners’ anxiety. Third, in traditional classrooms, teachers generally dominate and control the class, which may lead to learners’ nervousness and anxiety. Ewald (2007) concluded that learners prefer teachers to be a supporter, a speech facilitator, and someone who is not too critical. Learners also like teachers who are good at creating a relaxing environment.

**3.** From the perspective of culture**.** Culture is also an influence on FLA. Wu claimed that “Confucian influences are considered as the main cause of perceived reticence in language learners from Asian countries” (2010, p. 176). Historically, in countries that are strongly influenced by Confucian values, education and teachers are highly revered (Biggs, 1996; Lee, 1996; Scollon, 1999). First, this reverence causes the phenomenon that teachers are in full charge of the classroom. Therefore, in Confucian-influenced societies, teachers have more dominance in the classroom. That is to say learners are taught to be quiet, and they just need to listen to the teachers’ instruction obediently. This reverence further results in language learners’ reticence in speaking English (Zhao, 2007). Moreover, Tsui (1996) found that teachers tend to call on learners who seem to be more confident to answer questions, meaning that unconfident learners receive less attention. This neglect can result in less participation in class and reticence. Cyclically, language learners’ inexperience in communicating in English may further lead to their reticence in class, and when they are required to speak, it is likely that they will be anxious. Also, teacher-dominated teaching discourages self-expression (Zhao, 2007), again leading to reticence and anxiety. Additionally, Littlewood and Liu (1997) noted that learners’ anxiety can be due to high performance expectation. Therefore, in countries like China where most families only have one child, this issue becomes more prominent.

Other sources of FLA that are specific to Chinese English Learners**.** When conducting research on the relationship between FLA and six English learning difficulty variables among Chinese English learners ( i.e. Chinese learning history, academic learning history, test characteristics, classroom learning characteristics, English learning history, and developmental history), Chen and Chang (2004) found that FLA was more closely connected with the latter three variables, namely classroom learning characteristics, English learning history, and developmental history.

After collecting data from 332 participants from two Chinese universities, He (2013) generalized and summarized 14 reasons causing Chinese learners’ foreign language speaking anxiety. The main reasons were worry about negative evaluation, assessment in language classes, competitiveness from peer students (Bailey, 1983), fear of public speaking (Young, 1990), instructors’ aggressive ways of teaching (Young, 1991), and the belief that others are better language learners (Price, 1991). It can be seen that these findings are similar to results described in previous sections of this paper.

Teaching Implications from These Sources of FLA**:**

Based on different sources of FLA, several teaching implications can be summarized to reduce learners’ FLA. First, since learners’ low foreign language proficiency may lead to their FLA, the priority could be to enhance their proficiency, especially their oral proficiency. Therefore, teachers can provide learners with supplemental activities to help them improve their language proficiency (Young, 1991). Second, traditional teacher-centered or teacher-dominant classrooms should be transformed into student-centered and more self-regulated classrooms. Third, considering the methods used by teachers to correct mistakes directly in class, teachers could use gentler ways, such as giving indirect correction or providing feedback out of class. Fourth, since speaking publicly can be anxiety-provoking, students could be required to present their ideas via other media, or make more preparations prior to presenting in class. Last, prior to tests, helping learners become familiar with question types and materials could reduce stress. Also, instructors should ensure that tests are consistent with in-class instruction.

In addition, Young (1991) also categorized several suggestions that can be used to reduce anxiety. Foss and Reitzel (1988) found that anxious learners should first recognize their anxiety. Only in this way, can they find ways to deal with their anxiety. For instance, teachers could ask learners to identify their fears in different ways, such as writing them down. Additionally, learners can keep a journal to record their anxiety. Also, considering classroom procedures, teachers can encourage more group work or games, since games are believed to be effective in decreasing FLA. For example, learners could use the target language to solve a problem or puzzle (Young, 1991). Young (1991) also suggested customizing classroom activities. For instance, prior to giving a presentation publicly, students could practice repeatedly before a small group of people, and after that, instead of doing a presentation extemporaneously, students could be allowed to read their script in front of the class. According to Krashen (1988), a way to decrease FLA is to create an interesting class. Krashen believed that as long as the class content is interesting enough, students will forget that they are speaking another language.

Strategies Used by Language Learners to Cope with Language Anxiety**:**

Learners can also develop strategies for addressing FLA. By interviewing students studying English in Japan, Kondo and Yang (2004) categorized five common strategies used by these students to deal with their FLA. These strategies can be grouped into positive approaches (i.e. preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer seeking) and a negative approach (i.e. labeled resignation). Preparation is a behaviour strategy referring to learners studying hard in order to improve their self-rated proficiency and to face expected challenges. Relaxation includes behaviours, such as deep breathing. Positive thinking is a technique that enables learners to transfer their attention from anxious situations to more positive and pleasant thoughts. Peer seeking is a tendency for learners to find other peers who are suffering from the same anxiety or who are also having difficulties in class. The last strategy, labeled resignation, is an avoidance strategy whereby learners avoid facing what is causing their anxious emotions. For example, they may fall asleep in class to escape from their anxiety. Marwan (2007) also investigated strategies used by learners to overcome their FLA and listed a similar set of strategies as Kondo and Yang (2004). According to Marwan (2007), the four most common strategies were preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer seeking. Having presented research on FLA, I will now describe Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) before turning to a discussion of how MALL can assist in reducing FLA.

## Integration of Mobile Devices into English Teaching and Learning

Introduction of MALL and relevant research**.** The term, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), refers to “the use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use” (Sharples, 2006, p.24). There is a tendency toward an increasing number of people choosing mobile phones to assist their language learning due to their wide ownership and portability. Although, there are no specific statistics on how many language learning applications have been sold, considering the number of available applications and the massive language learning population, it can be assumed that the total number is extremely large.

MALL versus CALL**.** MALL has focused on pocket electronic dictionaries, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, MP3 players, and ultra-portable tablet PCs (Burston, 2013). In general, MALL is a combination of mobile learning and Computer-Assisted-Language-Learning (CALL) (Kululska-Hulme & Shield, 2008), but MALL has its unique nature, contributing to several benefits for language acquisition.

MALL provides us with incomparable advantages. Due to MALL’s portability and easy access, it can “enable a transition from the occasional supplemental use associated with the computer labs to frequent and integral use”. (Roschelle, 2003, p.260). Additionally, MALL can divide large, intimidating study activities and assignments into smaller tasks. Also, the mobility of learning allows for a personalized, learner-centered, situated, collaborative, ubiquitous, lifelong learning educational delivery (Sharples, Taylor & Vavloula, 2005). MALL can also boost learners’ autonomous learning, enabling them to adjust their learning tempo (Daryl & Beres，2011). That is to say mobile devices are able to help learners get out of general language lab assignments and routines (Sathe & Waltje, 2008).

MALL’s advantages have also been confirmed by research. Biddy (2011) conducted a study in a university in Japan, aiming to determine students’ preference between PCs and mobile phones in the context of language learning. The results revealed that students tended to devote more time to internet access by mobile phones, and when asked to retain only one device between PCs and mobile phones, nearly 90 percent of students chose mobile phones. Compared with mobile devices, PCs exhibit some inconvenience. For example, it takes longer to start up a computer, and PCs are heavier and stationary. Additionally, since more time is typically spent using mobile phones, students are often more proficient in using them than PCs. Moreover, Alexander (2004) found that students had a stronger emotional connection to their mobile phones, compared to PCs.

Thornton and Houser (2005) did research involving 44 Japanese university students. The students were divided into two groups such that one group received English vocabulary lessons on mobile phones, and the other group received the same material on the Web. The results showed that students who received lessons on mobile phones learned more, and the majority of students indicated a preference for mobile learning. Nearly all the students in the mobile phone group considered learning through mobile phones was a beneficial method.

However, different results were found in research done with 175 pre-intermediate learners of English using a system called VocabTutor. A preference was found among participants to access the log for vocabulary learning on computers, compared to mobile phones. Moreover, participants who chose to learn by mobile phones were less likely to finish all of the assigned vocabulary tasks (Stockwell, 2010). These results could be attributed to a number of factors, including the size of mobile phone screens, the cost of mobile phones, and noisy environments. However, considering that this research was conducted in 2010 and that mobile phone technologies have transformed dramatically, it is likely that there would be different results if the same research were conducted again today.

By 2013, there were more than 550 published works relating to MALL, which covered MALL’s “technical specifications, mobile device ownership, pedagogical design, learning theory, user attitudes, motivational effects, institutional infrastructure, and teacher training” (Burston, 2013, p. 104). Although less research has been conducted on applying MALL in dealing with language learners’ FLA and low language competence, the body of research suggests that multimedia (e.g. audio, video, animation, and interactivity) can help learners reduce their anxiety and create a less stressful classroom environment. Some of this research will be presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

MALL’s role in English teaching in China**.** MALL was for the most part created for out-of-class teaching and learning (Burston, 2014). In China, English teachers and language learners are “using mobile devices as a complementary tool” (Zhang, Song & Burston, 2011, p. 198-199), such as to distribute learning materials and content. However, MALL can be better utilized and integrated to enhance English learning, and learners can be given the ability to make individualized choices to use mobile devices in helping their learning (Mifsud, 2003).

Integrating MALL into classroom learning is better than solely using mobile devices to distribute materials and content. Without supports from teachers, many learners still have difficulties in mobile language learning activities. Moreover, to maximize the effect of technology-supported mobile learning, both teachers and learners have to collaborate, and “teachers’ pedagogical expertise will continue to play an important role” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009, p. 161).

Nonetheless, there have been successful examples of learner-led mobile language learning activities. One example was described by Song and Fox (2008). In this research, participants were university students studying in a Hong Kong university. They were not English majors, and their native language was Chinese. Their English levels were considered to be advanced; however, they had to read different learning materials in subjects like Journalism and Mechanical Engineering, which were beyond their English levels. Therefore, they used Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) to assist their vocabulary learning, and the results were positive. Most of them were quite optimistic about using mobile devices to learn English. It is important to note, however, that these participants were highly-motivated advanced learners, and beginning learners would likely require additional support and guidance. Thus, advanced and highly motivated language learners may be able to manage their learning independently and effectively, but in many cases, the teachers’ participation in helping language learners to use MALL optimizes learning results.

## **Research on the Effectiveness of MALL**

Empirical research has shown that MALL can help language learners make progress in language learning (e.g. Abdous et al, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2009b; Lord, 2008). Moreover, MALL can meet four basic language learning objectives: L2 acquisition, listening skills, explicit information of L2, and awareness of the target culture (Abdous & Facer, 2011). In the following sections, I will present some existing research that has explored the role of MALL in language acquisition as well as learners’ attitudes towards the use of mobile devices.

The use of podcasts and its theoretical underpinning in SLA**.** Podcasts have been explored to assess their potential value in supporting language learning. Podcasts are “a collection or series of digital media files that are released in episodes and downloaded through web syndication” (Lomicka & Lord, 2011, p. 17). Osaka Jogakuin College was among the first institution to offer students iPods and to use podcasts to encourage students to produce English speaking content, and it was found that most of the students held a positive attitude towards this new learning method (McCarty, 2005).

Student-produced podcasts have their theoretical underpinnings in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Swain and Lapkin (1995) recognize output as essential for second language learning. Podcasts can enable students to record their own speaking and to listen to themselves as they edit their output, go back, listen again, and edit their podcasts as necessary, as well as comment on their classmates’ recordings (Lord, 2008; Meng, 2005). Moreover, the characteristics of podcasts can be used to facilitate recording and distributing news broadcasts, developing brochures, creating or listening to teachers’ notes, recording lectures distributed directly to students’ MP3 players, recording meeting and conference notes, supporting student projects and interviews, and providing oral history archiving and on-demand distribution (Meng, 2005).

Podcasts in developing language learners’ pronunciation**.** In empirical research, Lord (2008) attempted to discover whether or not producing podcasts can help language learners improve their pronunciation. In his study, undergraduate students were required to make recorded podcasts in their Spanish phonetics class. It was found that podcasting improved students’ pronunciation, and the majority of participants held positive attitudes towards the use of podcasts. The participants felt that their instructors should use podcasts as a part of their classes in the future. However, different results were found in research conducted by Ducate and Lomicka (2009). Their data analysis showed that students’ pronunciation was not significantly improved by creating podcasts. The researchers surmised that this result was because the research only lasted 16-weeks, which was too short a time to see any differences. With respect to participants’ attitudes, however, the same results were found. Participants showed their appreciation of podcast use.

The relationship between MALL and vocabulary learning**.** In addition to podcasts, research has also been conducted to investigate the relationship between MALL and vocabulary acquisition (Thornton & Houser, 2005; Wu, 2014). For instance, Wu (2014) researched the effectiveness of using smartphones in English vocabulary learning. In her one-semester study, the participants were 50 students from one class who were aged from 20-23 at a university in China. Researchers created JAVA application software to help participants acquire vocabulary (Wu, 2014). The results showed that this vocabulary learning application can help learners boost their vocabulary. In another study, Thorton and Houser (2005) explored the use of mobile devices in vocabulary learning. They divided their participants into three groups: a paper-based group, a web-based group, and an email-based group. In the email-based group, participants received a vocabulary learning email three times per day via their mobile phone. For the web-based group, participants used PCs to learn the same learning content; whereas, the paper-based group received paper handouts. In the end, they found that the email-based group learned more vocabulary than students in the other two groups. In self-reports, 93% of participants in the email-based group indicated that this method was valuable, and 89% showed their desire to continue using it.

Zhang, Song, and Burston (2011) reexamined the use of MALL in vocabulary learning. They concluded several advantages provided by MALL in vocabulary learning. First, mobile devices allow learners to use fragmented time, boosting learning efficiency. Also, some functions, such as Short Message Service, serve as a reminder for learners to study, which can be done regularly, thereby dividing intimidating tasks into a series of smaller tasks. Learners can thus be encouraged to study more.

However, other research has produced different results. In Stockwell’s research (2010), there were no significant differences between acquiring vocabulary via mobile phones or via desktop computers. Also, Lu (2008) used two different ways (i.e. paper-based and short messages) to deliver vocabulary lessons and found that students were sometimes distracted by mobile phones. For example, it is common to pick up a mobile phone to play games rather than to learn.

To summarize, although different results have been found in empirical research, there is some evidence that MALL can be a useful tool for vocabulary learning.

## Learners’ Attitudes towards MALL

Supporters**.** In a large-scale mobile learning project conducted in the UK, which included 10,000 participants and 32 projects as part of the Mobile Learning Network, the majority of participants (91%) claimed that the mobile-assisted learning helped them, 93% said that it made study interesting, and 84% indicated that they would like to use it in the future. Participants indicated that mobile-assisted learning motivated them to learn.

In a pilot study in Ireland lasting for five-weeks, participants used an interactive voice response system to acquire Irish. Using this system, participants recorded their speech and received a text message about Irish learning each day. More than half the students (67%) reported that they made progress in their Irish language learning via the system. Almost all of them (95%) liked using the system, and 93% suggested that the system should be extended to other learners (Cooney & Keogh, 2007). Levy and Kennedy (2005) found that almost all of their participants reported that they enjoyed receiving text messages between sessions. Ally, Tin and Woodburn (2011) explored the possibility of iPhones being used for French language learning. They used iPhones to design and deliver five interactive French grammar and vocabulary lessons. The result suggested that students held a positive attitude towards this new language learning tool. Bennett, Maniar, Clark, and King (2008) utilized podcasts as a supplemental tool in a face-to-face course. They found that more than half the students used the podcasts once, but only 14% listened to most of the available episodes. Students reported that podcasts deepened their understanding, provided summaries, and allowed them to catch up with the class. Only 5% felt the podcasts were useless.

Skepticism**.** However, different results have also been found with respect to learners’ attitudes toward MALL. By analyzing a class discussion board, Reynolds and Bennett (2008) found students’ attitudes toward class podcasts to be 52% positive, 29% negative, and 19% neutral. Belanger (2005) reported that some students believed MALL acts as an entertainment tool; therefore, they saw its value for learning as limited. Also, it can be time-consuming to learn how to use MALL (Belanger, 2005). Third, due to technical issues, such as Internet services and data loss, it can be frustrating to use (Luckin, Connolly, Plowman & Airey, 2003). Attewell, Savill-Smith, Douch, R. (2009) reported that more than half of language learners preferred face-to-face interaction.

## Integration of MALL to Overcome FLA

Although some researchers are skeptical about the use of MALL, there is evidence showing MALL’s effectiveness in improving learners’ vocabulary, pronunciation, and out-of-class autonomous learning. Combining empirical research and its theoretical foundation I believe that MALL not only has the potential to improve language learners’ communicative competence but also to overcome language learners’ FLA. As the final component of this paper, I will discuss some ways in which MALL can help learners overcome their FLA.

MALL, learners’ language ability, confidence, and learning motivation**.** As discussed in the previous section, there is evidence that MALL can help language learners improve their pronunciation and acquisition of vocabulary, thus developing their language proficiency. Increased communicative competence can help learners to be more motivated to learn, improve their self-esteem, and overcome FLA.

Noels, Clément and Pelletier (1999) explored the relationship between language learners’ motivation and their language learning outcomes. They found that the less motivation students have, the less effort they will make. Furthermore, less effort is more likely to lead to lower proficiency, which may further contribute to their anxiety. Yan (1998) also found that a lack of motivation may result in increased anxious behaviour. Conversely, a less stressful environment might boost students’ motivation. Therefore, in order to reduce language learners’ anxiety, an effective approach is to promote and sustain leaners’ motivation.

The research showing positive attitudes toward MALL suggests that MALL can give language learners more motivation. One example of how MALL can be effective in improving learners’ motivation is the use of podcasts. Podcasts can increase language learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Since the use of podcasts can increase language learners’ control over learning materials and incorporate a wider selection of materials (e.g. listening to interviews in English), language learners’ motivation can be boosted by using this multimedia language learning tool (O’Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007). Shiri (2015) found that listening to English audio materials in the form of podcasts can improve language learners’ motivation. More importantly, learners who use podcasts gained better performance in post-tests in listening (Shiri, 2015). Bibby (2011) also found that students’ motivation and enthusiasm can be promoted by the use of mobile phones.

In addition to motivation, MALL can help learners gain more confidence. For example, Vesselinov and Grego (2012) found that Duolingo, a smartphone application for language learning, boosted language learners’ confidence and motivation in foreign language learning. In summary, acquisition of vocabulary, progress made in pronunciation, and boosted confidence can, together, help learners overcome their FLA.

The Role of MALL in Preparation**.** One strategy learners use to overcome FLA is to prepare thoroughly for class, because preparation can enable learners to believe that they have enough proficiency to face incoming challenges (Kondo and Yang, 2004). Considering the wide ownership and convenience of mobile devices, MALL seems an efficient assistant for both teachers and learners to use.

In conjunction with a flipped classroom model, MALL can help learners make preparations before class. In a flipped model, learners make some preparations before class (i.e. learn content and instructions), then use their knowledge for real-life problem solving and projects in class (Tucker, 2012). This model allows in-class time to be reserved for more important tasks and to use face-to-face time more efficiently. Specifically, in a language class, teachers can ask learners to study vocabulary and grammar before class. Then, during class, teachers can focus on answering students’ questions, and students can be guided to practice their target language and learn to negotiate meanings in an authentic environment.

By combining MALL with a flipped classroom, teachers can deliver learning materials to learners via mobile devices and ask them to do self-study before class. These materials can either be designed by teachers or obtained from available online materials. Compared to doing previews in traditional classes, this technology-based preparation can be more intriguing because of the diversified forms of learning materials brought by MALL. For example, learners can use electronic dictionaries on their mobile phones to learn vocabulary. Due to mobile phones’ portability, this vocabulary learning can occur anytime anywhere. Afterward, teachers can provide learning materials, such as a video or podcast, containing the learnt vocabulary. Learning vocabulary in this way can be very effective because it combines two types of vocabulary learning: incidental and intentional. The former refers to learning the word in a context without any intention, while the latter means to acquire words by memorization (Ahmed, 2011). Combining these two types of learning is an effective way to retain words.

Also, teachers’ roles have changed as a result of the integration of MALL into flipped classrooms. In flipped classrooms, teachers play multiple roles, which include content creator, media developer, or class facilitator (Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2011). Since teachers’ dominant position is changed, learners could have more opportunity to speak in class, which can help alleviate their FLA.

MALL can also assist in alleviating FLA resulting from teachers’ speech rate, which is a factor causing FLA (Zhao, 2007). If the speech rate is too fast, learners cannot follow what is said by the teacher, which may result in confusion and anxiety. In a flipped classroom, learners can choose to pause, to replay or even to slow down the learning material. They can repeat playing these materials when there is any ambiguity (Chen Hsieh, Wu, & Marek, 2017). In this way, learners can have more control over the speech rate and become less anxious.

Last, MALL can provide language learners with seamless, or continual, learning, which is an important solution to break through the limitation set by in-class-only learning (Chai, Wong & King, 2016). This seamless learning can increase language learners’ target language exposure. For instance, according to Rost (2006), English language teaching podcasts are particularly appropriate for the practice of extensive listening, for the purpose of motivating students to listen, as well as giving them the opportunity to listen to native speakers of English. Thorne and Payne (2005) recognized that podcasts have the potential to create a bridge to connect both in-class learning and out-of-class learning, accelerating the learning process and improving learning outcomes.By extensive exposure and accelerated learning speed, learners’ confidence can be boosted. As a result, learners’ FLA can also be reduced.

Junko Yamamoto (2013) listed several activities that can be used in flipped classrooms via MALL. For example, before a class, learners can use language learning applications, such as electronic dictionaries, to learn both vocabulary and pronunciation. Then, learners could be asked to bring photos of their families. In class, learners could display the photos and introduce their families in the target language. This activity is based on real context because it practices learners’ ability to introduce others, such as their family members. But Yamamoto also found a drawback in the use of this flipped classroom. Sometimes, teachers cannot control students’ language input, which may be time-consuming and distracting.

Obari and Lambacher (2015) conducted two case studies at a private university in Tokyo to examine how effective it was to use mobile technology in a ﬂipped classroom to help students’ improve their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score. In these two case studies, before each class, students previewed and then self-studied the class material in a variety of ways. For example, students could do self-study by watching online videos or listening to podcasts on mobile devices. Afterward, during class time, students mainly spent time asking related questions and participating in group discussions. The results from both case studies revealed that compared to traditional methods, the ﬂipped classrooms effectively improved students’ TOEIC scores and their language proficiency (Obari & Lambacher, 2015). From this perspective, students’ English proficiency can be boosted via the combined use of MALL and the flipped classroom. As a result of the increased proficiency, learners gain more confidence. Learners’ anxiety can be lowered as a result of their improved confidence.

In summary, the flipped classroom combined with MALL can be an optimal means for learners to overcome their FLA, since preparation is an essential technique used by learners to deal with their FLA, and a flipped classroom can be effective in helping students better prepare before class. In addition, MALL can assist language learners better prepare themselves for authentic language-use situations.

MALL can help learners’ self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning means that students are mostly responsible for their own learning. They can set clear learning objectives, seek learning materials, decide learning strategies, and give self-evaluations. (Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007). Self-regulated learning can help learners attain better learning outcomes. In a study conducted by Rousell (2008), participants were divided into three groups. They all listened to the same learning materials. One group could only listen once. The second group could listen twice. The last group could regulate times according to their own needs. Results indicated that the last group recalled more idea units under the self-regulated condition. Rousell (2011) conducted another study in which she recorded learners’ physical movement while using a mouse. She found that when learners had more power to control their information input and knowledge, their ability to process information was improved.

Oberg and Daniels (2012) designed a study using iPods as a tool to deliver course content. One group of participants was allowed to study at a self-regulated pace, whereas the other group had to follow the teacher’s instruction to finish learning on time. After learning, all participants had to take a post-test. It was found that the group that could self-regulate their learning pace consistently outperformed the control group. Additionally, via MALL students can do their homework without concern of negative reactions from class peers, which is a direct way to decrease their FLA (Savill-Smith, Attewell, & Stead, 2006). Since negative evaluation from others may cause language learners’ FLA, this avoidance of negative reaction can create an anxiety-reduced environment.

MALL can create individualized and learner-centered learning**.** MALL provides language learners with a private and individualized space, in which they can avoid negative evaluations from others. As has been mentioned, language learners’ anxiety can be provoked by their learning environment (Young, 1991). MALL can actually create a personal, customized learning environment. Compared to traditional classrooms, language learners can take classes with the absence of both their teachers and their peers, which can be much less anxiety-provoking. Also, Lan, Sung, and Chang (2007) found that a mobile-centered method can decrease language learners’ anxiety.

Compared to a traditional teacher-centered class, teachers’ dominant position is changed by MALL. Traditional classes in China are always controlled by teachers. Furthermore, because these classes are always large in size, teachers have to use more receptive activities (i.e. reading and listening), since these activities are time-saving, and teachers can have more control over them. As a result, language learners’ skills can develop in an unbalanced way; their reading and listening skills may be higher than speaking and writing. From this perspective, as mentioned previously, due to mobile devices’ portability and accessibility, the chance to use them to learn is increased. Extensive practice can make a contribution to lowering language learners’ anxiety. That is due to the fact that regular and frequent practice can facilitate proficiency. As is known, low competence may lead to anxiety, and conversely, high competence may reduce anxiety (Phillps, 1991). Kubo (2009) found similarly that building language learners’ fluency may better prepare them for future real contexts because fluency building can help language learners become less anxious. Moreover, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, p. 111) pointed out that “favorable experiences and increased achievement reduce anxiety”. Also, by MALL, teachers’ original dominance position is changed. Language learners become active in the learning process, which leads to higher levels of learning autonomy.

MALL can offer a medium for teachers to provide better academic support**.** Teachers’ academic support is essential in reducing learners’ FLA. During language learning, especially for beginners, teachers are among the most essential variable. From this perspective, MALL can provide a medium for teachers to give and sustain continuous support. Teachers’ academic support could also bring some benefits. For example, Goodenow (1993) indicated that when learners feel that they have emotional support from their teachers, they will have more motivation and will be more willing to devote themselves to their language learning. As a result of this increased motivation and more effort into learning, language learners’ proficiency and confidence could be promoted, thereby reducing FLA. In summary, teachers can use MALL as a platform to provide learners with academic support which can be provided anytime and anywhere; instead of giving direct correction and evaluation in class.

MALL can create a community and boost collaborative learning**.** Kukulska-Hulme (2006) found that MALL can be an effective tool for students’ communication, group study and practice. MALL can also create a community that can boost collaborative learning (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2007). A sense of community can enable language learners to know that they are not alone in suffering from FLA (Foss and Reitzel, 1988), making them more comfortable when facing it. Learners might feel less anxious in their language classes, if they know that their peers and their teachers can relate to them (Donley, 1997). Also, this sense of community can enable language learners to see that other learners also make linguistic mistakes, and the goal of language learning is not to be perfect. Meanwhile, via this community, it is convenient for teachers to communicate with learners about their ideas of making mistakes and to help learners set realistic goals (Ewald, 2007). Hence, this change in learners’ beliefs can make them less anxious about making linguistic mistakes and therefore reduce their FLA.

## MALL, Grammatical Competence, and Sociolinguistic Competence

Two key components of communicative competence are grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence. Grammatical competence involves grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. When it comes to grammatical competence, as discussed previously, MALL can help learners in their vocabulary learning and pronunciation (e.g. Thornton & Houser, 2005), and the majority of learners have positive attitudes toward the use of MALL. Regarding grammar itself, only minimal research has been done. Guerrero, Ochoa, and Collazos (2010) designed an activity using a mobile software tool to teach Spanish grammar. It was found that the majority of participants felt that this mobile software improved their grammar learning, and they believed that this software was user-friendly and easy to use. Therefore, MALL is promising as a means to improve learners’ grammatical competence.

Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to apply grammatical rules properly within a certain context (Canale, 1983). Different from traditional grammar teaching methods where learners are required to do translation or to do a number of grammar drills, the integration of MALL allows learners to practice their grammar in multiple contexts because of the diversified multimedia formats provided (e.g. watching a video containing the learnt grammatical rule being used in context).

Based on Savignon’s theory (1982), there are three elements that decide speakers’ communicative competence: negotiation, cooperation, and being context-based. The integration of MALL into flipped classrooms can provide learners with more chance to negotiate meanings (Kondo & Yang, 2004). Second, Kukulska-Hulme (2006) found that MALL can create more collaborative practice. Last, MALL can offer learners more context-based learning materials. For example, incidental vocabulary learning by watching a video provided by MALL is a way to learn vocabulary in context. In summary, MALL can increase learners’ communicative competence in a number of ways. This increased communicative competence can help learners alleviate their FLA. Conversely, if learners’ FLA is reduced, they will be more confident to speak to others, and their communicative competence can also be increased.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, by analyzing sources of learners’ FLA and the effects of MALL, it can be reasonably assumed that MALL can help learners to reduce their FLA, and increase their communicative competency. First, MALL can increase learners’ language proficiency. This increased proficiency can also improve their motivation, which may further reduce their FLA. Second, MALL helps learners to prepare for demanding classroom activities as well as interactions in daily life. Third, learners’ language practice can be enhanced with MALL. Extensive exposure to the target language allows learners to be more confident and less anxious. Fourth, MALL offers learners a chance to flexibly manage their own study, which can relieve stress. Fifth, MALL can change traditional teacher-centered learning. Language learning can be more individualized and student-centered. In this way, learners can avoid the pressure caused by teacher-centered methods. Also, MALL is a medium for both learners and teachers, by which teachers can easily provide academic support to learners. This can be effective in decreasing FLA. Last, MALL can help to build a virtual community, enabling learners who suffer from FLA to know that they are not alone, which can be reassuring for them.

As previously mentioned, combining MALL with the flipped classroom enables learners to have more time on learning to negotiate meanings in class with both their peers and teachers. Also, using MALL, learners’ opportunities for collaboration with their peers are increased. Last, technology-based learning is context-based. These three elements of negotiation, collaboration and context all have a bearing on the development of learners’ communicative competence.

In conclusion, teachers should be aware that when learners are reticent, they are likely suffering from FLA. It is also important to understand that helping learners overcome their FLA always takes time. As noted by Tsui (1996), it is the teachers’ responsibility to help and support learners to overcome their FLA.

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