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Perceptions, Practices, and Attitudes on the Use of iPads in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom: Evidence from the Andorran School System

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Abstract

Over the years, computers and mobile devices have transformed the way the English language is taught at school. While numerous bodies of literature are available globally regarding computer- and mobile-aided language learning, this field has never been explored in the local context of Andorra. This research thus aims to study the teachers' and students' perceptions, practices, and attitudes on the use of iPads in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in the Andorran school system. Guided by the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, it uses qualitative research design, employing ethnography as its methodology, to gather detailed and grounded answers to the research questions. Classroom observations, semi-structured focus group interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data from English teachers and EFL students of the first and second levels of Andorran secondary schools. Qualitative data analysis and descriptive statistics were carried out to process the information. Findings reveal that the users have positive perceptions towards the use of iPads in English classes and the technology is used primarily to accomplish tasks identified in the course curriculum guidelines. Their attitudes are mostly favorable towards iPads especially due to the perceived benefits of inclusivity, flexibility, increased engagement, and more efficient production of better outputs. However, there are also some drawbacks identified, such as distraction, dependency, and saturation. Further studies are recommended to explore the benefits of using tablets in educational management and technology.

Keywords: *CALL, MALL, tablets, mobile devices, EFL, digital literacies.*

1. Introduction

The integration of digital technology into education has become a defining feature of 21st-century schooling. Across the globe, policymakers and educators are experimenting with devices, platforms, and digital ecosystems that promise to transform how students learn and teachers teach. Andorra, despite being a small European country, undertook one of the most ambitious reforms in this respect.

In 2013, the government launched the Strategic Plan for the Renewal and Improvement of the Andorran Education System (PERMSEA). Its central pillar was the adoption of a competence-based curriculum supported by universal access to digital technology. Specifically, every student and teacher in the Andorran school system received an iPad. This decision created a rare opportunity to study the effects of large-scale, compulsory digital integration in a multilingual and multicultural context.

The Andorran education system coexists with French and Spanish systems, but the Andorran schools became the first to systematically integrate iPads into teaching. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms were chosen as the research focus because of their centrality to the curriculum and because language learning requires authentic communication, access to multimedia, and extended practice opportunities. The iPad has the potential to meet these needs, but it can also introduce risks such as distraction and overreliance on technology.

This study thus asks: *How do teachers and students perceive the use of iPads in EFL classrooms? What practices emerge? What attitudes are associated with this innovation?* By answering these questions, the research not only provides empirical evidence for the Andorran case but also contributes to international debates on technology integration, teacher training, and language pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From CALL to MALL

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) originated in the 1960s and has gone through several stages: behavioristic (drill and practice), communicative (focusing on interaction), and integrative (embedding authentic tasks and collaboration) (Garrett, 2009). CALL is not simply the use of computers in classrooms; it represents a dynamic interplay between technology, pedagogy, and theory. Its impact depends less on the machine itself than on how teachers integrate it into the curriculum.

With the rise of mobile devices, CALL evolved into Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). MALL emphasizes portability, flexibility, and the learner's mobility (Chinnery, 2006). Unlike static desktop setups, mobile devices can support spontaneous, informal, and personalized learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2018) stresses that mobility is not only about the device but also about learners carrying their learning across contexts, times, and spaces.

2.2 Benefits and Opportunities

Research has consistently shown benefits of mobile technology in EFL learning:

- Vocabulary acquisition improves when students use apps and mobile prompts (Stockwell, 2007).
- Pronunciation practice is enhanced through multimedia resources (Saran et al., 2009).
- Motivation and engagement rise when learners can use familiar devices (Thornton & Houser, 2005).
- Autonomy and flexibility are fostered as learners access authentic resources anytime, anywhere.
- Inclusivity increases when devices reduce barriers to participation and allow differentiated instruction.

2.3 Risks and Drawbacks

However, risks are also documented:

- Distraction: learners may shift attention to games or social media.
- Technocentrism: reforms may prioritize devices over pedagogy (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017).
- Equity issues: in contexts without universal provision, mobile integration can widen digital divides.
- Overreliance: students may develop dependency, neglecting other learning strategies.

2.4 Large-Scale Tablet Initiatives

The outcomes of large-scale initiatives vary widely. In California, the Los Angeles Unified School District's iPad program was labeled a failure due to rushed planning and insufficient teacher training (Noguchi, 2016). By contrast, Scotland's national roll-out was more successful, thanks to careful piloting and strong professional development (Burden et al., 2012). Uruguay's "Plan Ceibal" also stands out as an early and ambitious one-laptop-per-child initiative with mixed but generally positive long-term results.

International large-scale initiatives show that success depends on teacher training and sustained support (Burden et al., 2012; Noguchi, 2016).

2.5 The Andorran Gap

Despite international research, Andorra had no prior studies on technology in language classrooms. Given its unique combination of universal provision, multilingualism, and centralized policymaking, the Andorran case provides fresh insights into both the potential and the limitations of MALL.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an ethnographic mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative tools. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm guided the work, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and contextual meaning-making.

3.2 Participants

Participants included both EFL teachers and secondary school students (ages 13–16). In total:

- 25 teachers participated across interviews, observations, and questionnaires.
- Over 300 students completed questionnaires, with smaller groups involved in interviews and observations.

Schools were selected from Encamp, Ordino, and Andorra la Vella, ensuring geographical and demographic diversity.

3.3 Instruments

- Classroom Observations: Recorded interaction patterns, types of tasks, and engagement levels with iPads.
- Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with both teachers and students to probe beliefs, attitudes, and motivations.
- Questionnaires: Administered to a larger population to quantify perceptions, frequency of use, and perceived outcomes.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data triangulation followed a **convergent parallel mixed-methods design**. Classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaire results were analyzed separately, then cross-validated to identify convergences and discrepancies. For instance, both observations and surveys confirmed high engagement but also revealed differing interpretations of "autonomy": teachers equated it with classroom independence, while students linked it to flexible scheduling. This methodological integration strengthened internal validity and contextualized quantitative trends within ethnographic detail.

- Qualitative Data: Coded thematically to identify recurring perceptions, practices, and attitudes.
- Quantitative Data: Analyzed with descriptive statistics to reveal general trends and differences between teachers and students.
- Triangulation: Ensured validity by cross-checking across instruments.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parental consent for minors. Data anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. The researcher's dual role as educator and policymaker was explicitly acknowledged, and reflexivity was applied to minimize bias.

4. Findings

4.1 Perceptions

Quantitative data show that 93% of students reported daily iPad use for English learning, with 85% citing increased engagement and motivation. Seventy-eight percent perceived greater autonomy, while 22% acknowledged some dependency. Sixty-one percent rated their digital competence higher than their teachers'. Teachers similarly valued iPads for flexibility, multimedia access, and differentiated instruction but identified insufficient training (75%) as a major limitation.

4.2 Practices

- In-Class Use: Students used iPads for vocabulary building, reading comprehension, group projects, and multimedia presentations. Teachers employed them for class management, content delivery, and formative assessment.
- Out-of-Class Use: Many students extended learning by using apps, watching English videos, or accessing online dictionaries. Teachers used iPads for lesson planning and communication with students.

4.3 Attitudes and drawbacks

Students associated iPad use with autonomy, inclusivity, and creativity, while teachers appreciated its motivational value and classroom flexibility. However, both groups noted drawbacks: 40% of students reported occasional distraction from non-academic apps, and 22% felt dependent on the devices. Teachers expressed concerns over classroom management, workload, and the potential for superficial engagement.

5. Discussion

Findings align with international MALL research demonstrating that mobile devices enhance engagement, inclusivity, and motivation but also introduce new pedagogical challenges. The Andorran case, however, adds two distinctive insights:

1. Universal Provision Prevented Inequity: Unlike contexts with unequal access, every student in Andorra had an iPad, eliminating digital divides and ensuring equity.
2. Multilingual Context Shaped Perceptions: In a system where Catalan, Spanish, French, and Portuguese coexist, the iPad was seen not only as a tool for English but as a bridge across languages and cultures.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study shows that technology alone does not transform learning. Many practices replicated traditional pedagogy (e.g., completing worksheets digitally). Transformation requires teacher training, curriculum alignment, and conscious efforts to move beyond substitution.
From a policy perspective, the study highlights the importance of coupling technological reforms with professional development, support structures, and mechanisms for ongoing evaluation.

6. Conclusion

This study provides the first empirical evidence on the integration of iPads into Andorran EFL classrooms. It shows that:

- Students and teachers hold mostly positive perceptions.
- Practices align with curriculum but often reinforce existing pedagogy.
- Attitudes reveal enthusiasm among students and cautious optimism among teachers.
- Drawbacks include distraction, dependency, and technocentrism risks.

Contributions

- Adds to international MALL literature with context-specific findings from Andorra.
- Provides evidence to inform policymaking on digital reforms.
- Highlights the importance of teacher training and digital literacies.

Implications

- For pedagogy: integrate iPads not just as tools but as enablers of collaboration, creativity, and authentic language use.
- For policy: ensure professional development, evaluation, and curriculum alignment.
- For research: explore long-term impacts, cross-subject integration, and intercultural aspects of mobile learning.

Practical Recommendations

- Professional Development: Continuous digital-pedagogical training focusing on task design, classroom management, and learner autonomy.
- Curriculum Alignment: Integrate tablet-based projects with competence-based learning goals rather than substituting paper tasks with digital equivalents.
- Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish ongoing data collection (usage logs, student outcomes) to inform evidence-based policy adjustments.
- Balanced Usage: Encourage hybrid teaching that combines screen-based and traditional interaction to mitigate dependency and screen fatigue.

The Andorran experience offers valuable lessons for policymakers and educators worldwide seeking to balance innovation with pedagogical coherence in technology-rich learning environments.

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