Mobile Learning as an Educational Technology Innovation: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Mobile learning has become a prominent focus in educational technology research, driven by the widespread adoption of mobile devices and the growing emphasis on flexible, learner-centred pedagogies. Beyond its technological dimension, mobile learning is increasingly conceptualised as an educational technology innovation that reshapes pedagogical practices, learning environments, and institutional arrangements. This systematic literature review aims to synthesise contemporary research on mobile learning through an explicit innovation lens, examining how it has been theorised, implemented, and evaluated across educational contexts. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, the review analyses peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025 and indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The synthesis focuses on theoretical framings, research designs, pedagogical applications, learning outcomes, adoption processes, and systemic challenges. The findings indicate that mobile learning is associated with positive effects on learner engagement, motivation, and task-specific learning outcomes when supported by pedagogically sound instructional designs. However, the innovative potential of mobile learning is constrained by methodological limitations, an overreliance on individual-level adoption models, and persistent issues related to equity, sustainability, and institutional support. This review contributes to the literature by positioning mobile learning as a socio-technical educational innovation and by proposing a future research agenda that aligns with the British Journal of Educational Technology's emphasis on theory-informed, practice-relevant, and systemically grounded educational technology research.

Keywords: mobile learning; educational technology innovation; systematic literature review; PRISMA 2020;

Introduction

Over the past decade mobile learning (m-learning) has moved from experimental pilots to an established area of educational technology inquiry. Defined broadly as learning mediated by mobile, networked devices that enables access to resources and interactive activities across settings, mobile learning is frequently associated with pedagogical practices such as microlearning, situated tasks, and in-situ formative assessment. The scholarly interest reflects both the rapid diffusion of mobile hardware and the potential of mobile affordances (portability, sensors, persistent connectivity, push notifications) to support learning processes that differ qualitatively from traditional classroom or desktop-based instruction (Wu et al., 2012; Sung, Chang, & Liu, 2016). (ScienceDirect)

Research on mobile learning spans multiple disciplinary traditions and educational levels, from K–12 to higher education and workplace learning, and employs diverse methodological approaches, including randomized and quasi-experimental designs, surveys, design-based research, and qualitative case studies (Crompton & Burke, 2018; Kukulska-Hulme, 2018). Despite a substantial evidence base, consensus on the conditions under which mobile learning functions as a genuine innovation meaning a sustainable, pedagogically transformative, and scalable change remains incomplete. Previous reviews have frequently

focused on either effectiveness or adoption; fewer syntheses explicitly frame mobile learning through an innovation lens that integrates pedagogical, organizational, and equity perspectives (Crompton & Burke, 2018; Sung et al., 2016). (ScienceDirect)

This review asks three interrelated questions: How is mobile learning conceptualised as an educational technology innovation? What empirical evidence exists for its effects on learning processes and outcomes? What barriers and systemic considerations influence the scalability and sustainability of mobile learning initiatives? The review aims to provide a theory-informed map of the field and to propose directions for research that align with both scholarly rigor and practical relevance.

Methodology

Research Design and Review Framework

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise empirical and review-based evidence on mobile learning as an educational technology innovation. A systematic approach was selected to ensure methodological transparency, replicability, and analytical rigor, in line with best practices in educational technology research. The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 framework, which provides updated standards for identifying, screening, assessing, and reporting scholarly literature. PRISMA 2020 is widely recognised as an authoritative guideline for systematic reviews across social sciences and education, including technology-enhanced learning research.The review was designed to address three interrelated analytical aims: to examine how mobile learning has been conceptualised as an educational innovation, to synthesise empirical evidence regarding its pedagogical outcomes, and to identify methodological and systemic challenges affecting its sustainability and scalability.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

To capture high-quality and interdisciplinary research, a comprehensive literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), ERIC, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they index leading journals in educational technology, learning sciences, and applied pedagogy.The search covered publications from January 2010 to March 2025, reflecting the period in which mobile learning research expanded substantially following widespread smartphone adoption. Search strings were constructed iteratively using combinations of keywords related to mobile learning, pedagogy, innovation, adoption, and learning outcomes. Core search terms included "mobile learning", "m-learning", and "mobile-assisted learning", combined with "education", "pedagogy", "innovation", "learning outcomes", and "technology adoption". Database-specific syntax adjustments were applied to ensure consistency across platforms.Only peer-reviewed journal articles written in English were considered. Conference papers, editorials, book chapters without empirical analysis, and purely technical studies lacking educational evaluation were excluded to maintain methodological consistency and relevance to educational practice.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: first, they explicitly addressed mobile learning in formal or informal educational contexts; second, they reported empirical

findings using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches, or constituted systematic or meta-analytic reviews; third, they examined pedagogical processes, learning outcomes, adoption dynamics, or implementation issues related to mobile learning.Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on non-educational domains such as mobile health without learning components, described system development without pedagogical evaluation, or lacked sufficient methodological detail. These criteria ensured that the final corpus reflected mobile learning as an educational technology innovation rather than a purely technical phenomenon.

Study Selection Process (PRISMA 2020)

The study selection followed the four-stage PRISMA 2020 process: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, all records retrieved from the selected databases were compiled and duplicates were removed. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were independently reviewed to assess relevance to the research aims. Studies that clearly failed to meet inclusion criteria were excluded at this stage.Full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility, with particular attention to methodological clarity, relevance to educational contexts, and explicit engagement with mobile learning. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage included insufficient empirical evidence, lack of pedagogical focus, or redundancy with broader e-learning research. The final set of included studies formed the analytical corpus for synthesis.A PRISMA 2020 flow diagram was developed to document each stage of the selection process, including the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and included. This diagram provides a transparent visual summary of the review process and is included as a figure in the manuscript, consistent.

Data Extraction and Coding

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a structured coding framework. For each included study, information was recorded on publication year, country or region, educational level, research design, theoretical framework, mobile technology characteristics, learning domain, outcomes measured, and key findings. Attention was given to theoretical positioning and pedagogical design features.Coding was iterative and reflexive, allowing categories to be refined as patterns emerged across studies. This approach supported the identification of cross-cutting themes while preserving contextual specificity.
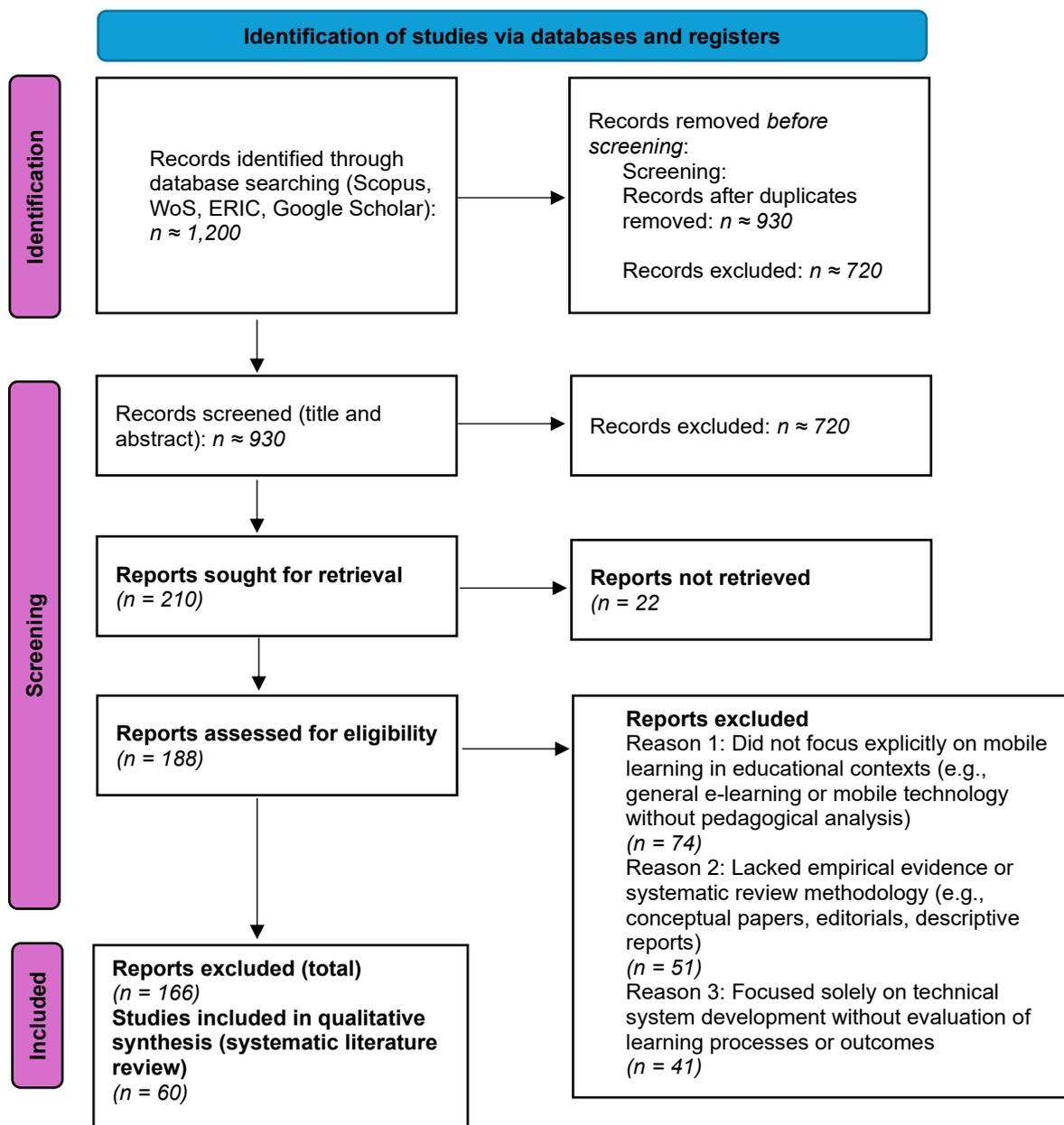
Quality Appraisal

Although PRISMA 2020 does not mandate a single quality appraisal tool, methodological quality was assessed through criteria appropriate to study design, including clarity of research questions, appropriateness of methodology, transparency of data collection and analysis, and coherence between findings and conclusions. Studies with weak methodological reporting were retained only if they contributed conceptually to understanding mobile learning innovation, and their limitations were explicitly acknowledged in the synthesis.

Data Synthesis

Given the heterogeneity of research designs and outcome measures, a narrative thematic synthesis was employed rather than a statistical meta-analysis. This approach is widely used in educational technology reviews where experimental comparability is limited. Findings were synthesised across studies to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and research gaps related to mobile learning as an educational technology innovation. Where available, results from meta-analyses and large-scale reviews were used to contextualise trends in learning outcomes and effect sizes. The synthesis emphasised relationships between pedagogical design, learning processes, and contextual factors, aligning with focus on explanatory rather than purely descriptive accounts of technology use.

Methodological Rigor and Transparency

To enhance rigor and reduce bias, the review followed a predefined protocol, documented all stages of the selection process, and applied consistent inclusion criteria. The use of PRISMA 2020 strengthens the credibility and replicability of the review, while the narrative synthesis approach allows for theoretically rich interpretation of diverse evidence.

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified through database searching (Scopus, WoS, ERIC, Google Scholar): *n ≈ 1,200*

Records removed *before screening*:
    Screening:
    Records after duplicates removed: *n ≈ 930*

Records excluded: *n ≈ 720*

Screening

Records screened (title and abstract): *n ≈ 930*

Records excluded: *n ≈ 720*

Reports sought for retrieval *(n = 210)*

Reports not retrieved *(n = 22*

Reports assessed for eligibility *(n = 188)*

Reports excluded
Reason 1: Did not focus explicitly on mobile learning in educational contexts (e.g., general e-learning or mobile technology without pedagogical analysis) *(n = 74)*
Reason 2: Lacked empirical evidence or systematic review methodology (e.g., conceptual papers, editorials, descriptive reports) *(n = 51)*
Reason 3: Focused solely on technical system development without evaluation of learning processes or outcomes *(n = 41)*

Included

Reports excluded (total) *(n = 166)*
Studies included in qualitative synthesis (systematic literature review) *(n = 60)*

Results

The included corpus spans systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and primary empirical studies across multiple journals. The synthesis yielded five interlocking themes: pedagogical innovation, learning outcomes and engagement, technology acceptance and adoption, equity and access, and methodological patterns and gaps.Pedagogical innovation emerges when mobile technologies are used to enact learning activities that exploit device affordances—short, scaffolded tasks for just-in-time practice, situated inquiry using location or sensor data, collaborative micro-tasks, and integrated formative feedback loops. Studies that report positive learning impacts typically pair mobile use with thoughtful instructional design grounded in learning theory and assessment alignment (Crompton & Burke, 2018; Kukulska-Hulme, 2018). (ScienceDirect)Learning outcomes and engagement: Meta-analytic work indicates moderate positive effects of integrated mobile device use on specific learning tasks (e.g., vocabulary acquisition, procedural practice) and on engagement metrics; effect sizes and durability of gains vary by domain and by the quality of pedagogical integration (Sung et al., 2016). Several domain-specific reviews corroborate these patterns—for instance, mobile interventions in language learning and professional skill development show meaningful short-term gains when interventions include spaced practice and feedback (Kukulska-Hulme, 2018). (ScienceDirect)

Technology acceptance and adoption: Research frequently applies TAM and UTAUT frameworks, identifying perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, facilitating conditions, and self-efficacy as recurrent predictors of adoption and sustained use. However, normative institutional factors such as teacher professional development, curriculum alignment, and policy support more strongly predict large-scale uptake and sustainability (Alrasheedi, Capretz, & Raza, 2015; Dahri et al., 2023). Equity and access: Mobile learning is often framed as a route to increased access, especially where smartphone penetration is higher than desktop access; nevertheless, differential device quality, connectivity reliability, and digital literacy raise equity concerns that can limit impact (Traxler, 2009; recent country-level studies). Methodological patterns: The literature is dominated by cross-sectional and short-term quasi-experimental studies; design-based research and mixed-methods are growing but longitudinal, large-scale randomized trials remain scarce. These observations are consistent across multiple systematic reviews (Wu et al., 2012; Crompton & Burke, 2018). (ScienceDirect)

Discussion

Interpreting mobile learning as an educational technology innovation requires attending to pedagogical, organizational, and social dimensions simultaneously. The evidence indicates that mobile learning can constitute a genuine innovation when it changes how teachers design learning tasks, how learners engage with content across contexts, and when institutional

processes adapt to support these practices. Studies emphasize that mobile affordances produce pedagogical possibilities—such as situated practice and continuous formative assessment—that are distinct from desktop or LMS-centered approaches, but realising these possibilities requires curriculum alignment, teacher capacity building, and supportive policy frameworks. The emphasis on adoption models in much of the literature suggests that the field is still consolidating a transition from understanding uptake to understanding deeper change processes; theoretical work that draws on activity theory, sociocultural perspectives, and implementation science can help to close this gap (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Hwang, 2014). (Open Research Online)Equity and sustainability demand direct research and policy attention. Without investments in connectivity, device provisioning, teacher training, and governance of learner data, mobile learning initiatives are unlikely to scale equitably. Research designs that foreground cost, maintenance, and governance assessments alongside pedagogical effectiveness will be most useful to policy makers. Methodologically, the field should advance toward longitudinal mixed-methods and pragmatic trials that balance internal validity with ecological realism.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has examined mobile learning as an educational technology innovation by synthesising peer-reviewed research published between 2010 and 2025. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, the review provides a comprehensive overview of how mobile learning has been conceptualised, implemented, and evaluated across diverse educational contexts. The findings indicate that mobile learning has evolved from a peripheral technological tool into a recognised component of contemporary educational practice, particularly within higher education and blended learning environments. As an innovation, mobile learning demonstrates its strongest impact when it is embedded within pedagogically grounded instructional designs rather than introduced as a stand-alone technological solution.The review further shows that empirical evidence generally supports the positive influence of mobile learning on learner engagement, motivation, and task-specific learning outcomes. These benefits are most consistently observed in learning contexts that emphasise practice, feedback, and contextualised activities, such as language learning and professional education. However, the evidence for deeper conceptual understanding and long-term learning gains remains mixed, highlighting the importance of instructional scaffolding and alignment with learning objectives. This suggests that the educational value of mobile learning is contingent on pedagogical quality rather than technological novelty.

From an innovation and implementation perspective, the review identifies technology acceptance and adoption as central but insufficient explanatory frameworks. While models such as TAM and UTAUT provide insights into individual intentions to use mobile learning, they offer limited understanding of how mobile learning innovations are sustained and scaled within educational systems. Institutional support, teacher professional development, curriculum integration, and policy alignment emerge as critical factors influencing the long-term success of mobile learning initiatives. Furthermore, equity and access issues continue to challenge the assumption that mobile learning inherently promotes educational inclusion, particularly in contexts marked by uneven connectivity and digital literacy.Finally, this review highlights important directions for future research in line with the aims and scope of the British

Journal of Educational Technology. There is a clear need for theory-informed, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies that examine how mobile learning reshapes teaching practices, learning processes, and institutional arrangements over time. Future work should also address sustainability, data governance, and ethical considerations to support responsible innovation in mobile learning. By advancing research that integrates pedagogical, sociotechnical, and systemic perspectives, the field can move beyond short-term effectiveness studies toward a deeper understanding of mobile learning as a sustainable and transformative educational technology innovation.

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