

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF MOBILE APPLICATION FOR ENGLISH COURSE (MApEC) AS A PRE-LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOL

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Abstract

The use of mobile technology in language learning is rapidly growing. However, research on the use of mobile applications to foster English language learning particularly as a pre-language learning tool is still lacking. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate students' perceptions on the use of Mobile Application in English Course (MApEC) as a pre-language learning tool to help prepare them for the actual class. A total of 29 Semester 1 Diploma students from a selected higher institution in Negeri Sembilan participated in the survey which was conducted to find out their perceptions on the use of MApEC as a whole, and as a pre-language learning tool to assist them prior to the actual English language class. The results indicate that participants were in favour of using MApEC and perceived that it is a very helpful pre-language learning tool. Therefore, the initial findings of this study can be used to further develop MApEC not only as a useful pre-language learning tool, but for English language learning as a whole.

Keywords: English language learning, Mobile assisted language learning, Pre-language learning

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Introduction

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) is a teaching and learning methodology that utilizes mobile devices such as smartphone and tablet in the process of teaching and learning (Rodríguez-Arancón, Arus & Calle, 2013). The rapid advancement of technology has seen the importance of MALL in language learning classrooms especially in higher learning institutions.

Despite the increase use of mobile technology in education including in language learning such as in testing and teaching purposes, the use of mobile applications particularly as a pre-language learning tool is still lacking. Hence, this mobile assisted language learning application called MApEC (Mobile Application for English Course) is developed as a pre-language learning tool to facilitate students prior to their actual language class. For the purpose of this study, 'tool' is referred to the mobile application used in the study (i.e. MApEC). Pre-language learning in the context of the present study refers to the activities that students do outside classrooms before they come to the actual language class. Examples of the pre-language learning activities include reading relevant notes on important terminologies in Reading skill (e.g. skimming, scanning, etc) or Essay Writing (e.g. Thesis statement, Topic sentence, etc) before attending the actual class. The purpose of this activity is to ensure that students have some background information on the subject matter which will be taught in the class later.

There is a consensus among scholars on the importance of pre-learning activity. For instance, Khanova, Roth, Rodgers and McLaughlin (2015) highlighted the importance of pre-learning activities when they stated that it affords students with more time to process new information. Conti (2015) echoed the same idea by saying that pre-learning activity is essential to language students as it provides relevant information before the real learning begins. Additionally, students can practice

targeted skills in a safe and comfortable environment. A more recent study by Kinsella, Mahon and Lillis (2017) had also come to a similar conclusion on the importance of pre-learning activities to aid learning. Acknowledging the importance of pre-learning activities especially for language students, a mobile application called MAPeC was developed as a pre-language learning tool to facilitate students before the real language lessons begin.

Literature Review

Mobile Technology in Teaching and Learning

As technology advances, people prefer to use mobile phones in their daily life. This situation has garnered much attention from scholars, particularly among educational researches (Azizan & Gunasegaran, 2013). At higher learning education for instance, the use of digital technology has attracted much interest in recent years. One possible reason to the increase use of mobile technology is to ensure that learning environment is modern, relevant and capable to produce graduates who are equipped with qualities that are aligned with the work environment and their career expectations (Hinze et.al, 2017).

The fact that mobile devices are becoming increasingly ubiquitous, and “a harbinger of the future of learning” (Keegan 20012, p. 9), it is not surprising that many educational researchers and practitioners have incorporated the technology into their teaching and learning environments. This is further confirmed by the growing number of research which has focused on mobile learning such as the effectiveness of mobile learning (e.g., Al-Fahad, 2009; Baya'a & Daher, 2009; Evans, 2008; Lu, 2008; Mcconatha & Praul, 2008; Shen, Wang, & Pan, 2008; Thornton & Houser, 2005) and the development of mobile learning systems to assist student learning (e.g., Chen & Hsu, 2008; Chen, Kao, & Sheu, 2003; Ketamo, 2003; Sung et al., 2005).

The usefulness of mobile technology is beyond the teaching and learning purposes. Apart from being valuable teaching and learning tools, mobile devices can also be used by school teachers for attendance reporting, reviewing student marks, general access of central school data, and managing their schedules more effectively. In higher education for instance, mobile devices can provide course material to students, including due dates for assignments and information about timetable and room changes.

Despite the great impact of mobile technologies on teaching and learning, it is undeniable that every technology has some limitations and weaknesses, and mobile devices are no exception. Kukulska-Hulme (2007) summarized some usability problems with respect to mobile technology such as the physical features of mobile devices (small screen size, inadequate memory, and short battery life); content and software application limitations; network speed and reliability; and physical environment issues. However, looking at the rapid improvement of mobile products, with advanced functions and various applications and accessories available these days, the technical limitations of mobile devices may be a temporary issue.

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) has been defined as the use of “mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013, p. 3701). In other words, MALL is a language teaching and learning methodology that utilizes mobile devices ranging from smart phones and MP3/MP4 players to laptop and tablet computers (Rodríguez-Arancón, Arus & Calle, 2013).

The rapid advancement of technology has seen the increased importance of MALL in language learning classrooms especially in higher learning institution. According to The Horizon (2016), many higher learning institutions are shifting from the traditional methodology towards the technology driven methodology. In fact, it is not surprising that language teachers in schools have also adopted mobile technologies into their individual teaching and learning contexts. In Malaysia, although the usage of mobile devices is still a new idea, the initiative to shift from traditional to technology driven

learning has started since 1997 (Ehsan, Kemboja & Rosniah, 2013).

There has been a surprisingly large amount of research with respect to MALL published over the last two decades (e.g. Ali & Hassan, 2014; Gikas & Grant, 2013; Hsu, 2012; Saran, Seferoglu & Cagilti, 2009; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). In Malaysia for instance, many studies have been conducted to find the perfect fit for the usage of MALL in Malaysian classrooms (e.g. Azizan & Gunasegaran, 2013; Ganapathy, Shuib & Azizan, 2016; Ehsan, Kemboja & Rosniah, 2013). According to Mohamad and Muniandy (2014), although the usage of MALL in Malaysian language classrooms is promising, there are still a lot of rooms for improvement.

There are various factors that contribute to the rise of MALL in language learning. One of them is undeniably due to its portable nature. According to Thomas, Reinders and Warschauer (2012), the use of MALL will relieve students as they are no longer required to bring textbooks and stationery to classrooms. Instead, they can simply carry their mobile devices in their pockets. Most importantly, the use of MALL allows language learning process to take place almost everywhere at any time, and not necessarily in classrooms. This is a flexible learning model that allows learning to take place in both formal and informal settings by decreasing “the dependence on fixed locations for work and study, and consequently change the way we work and learn” (Peters, 2007).

Another reason for the emergence of MALL in language learning is shared by Prensky (2005) who claimed that mobile devices are a powerful tool. He equals mobile devices to computers where users can utilize them for various purposes. Prensky’s idea is understandable as the advancement of technology has increased the functionality of mobile devices. For instance, users can easily communicate with each other, search and share information or even start a new project using mobile devices. As a result, other learning tools such as textbooks and stationery become irrelevant.

Studies on Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

As far as language teaching and learning is concerned, one aspect of MALL that has been the interest of many scholars is users’ perceptions of MALL a language learning tool. This is an important area of study because students experience learning differently as they come from diverse backgrounds. Ganapathy, Shuib and Azizan (2016) conducted a study on students’ perceptions towards their application called MyGrate. It was found that there are myriad of elements that need to be taken into consideration in building a mobile application. Among the elements based on the respondents’ feedback are connectivity, phone capability and appearance.

Ali and Hassan (2014) also provide insight into users’ perceptions of MALL in second language listening comprehension. They found that MALL is an effective tool to enhance language learners’ listening comprehension skills. The respondents of their study further clarified that usage of mobile devices is an interesting way to learn language. Additionally, Hsu (2012) studied the perceptions of 45 language learners from different countries and backgrounds. The study revealed that learners from diverse backgrounds perceived MALL differently. Majority of the respondents agreed that MALL is an effective tool for learning English language.

In local perspective, Ehsan, Kemboja and Rosniah (2013) studied the acceptance of MALL among 25 graduate students and found that MALL is positively accepted by them. The respondents perceived MALL positively as it enables them to access useful materials, to carry out various activities and to communicate easily with their instructors and peers. Similar findings were found by Subramaniam and Harun (2013) in which students perceived the use of mobile phone in language learning positively. Another study conducted by Ganapathy, Shuib and Azizan (2014) on mobile application named MyGraTe further confirms the positive perception on MALL in language learning as the interactivities of the application attracted the students to use it.

In brief, the usage of mobile applications and MALL in particular, is on the rise. MALL is fast becoming an essential tool in language learning and it is believed to continue to grow and develop and eventually become a significant tool in the process of language teaching and learning. However,

despite the extensive research on the integration of MALL in language teaching and learning, one particular area that receives less attention is on the use of MALL as a pre-language learning tool to help students prepare prior to their actual language class. Some may argue that such activities can be done using the conventional method by reading textbooks. However, with the advancement of mobile technology, this conventional way has becoming less popular particularly among the young generations. Thus, the present study is conducted to find out students' perceptions on the use of mobile assisted language learning called MApEC (Mobile Application in English Course) as a whole, and as a pre-language learning tool to assist students before the actual language lessons begins.

Methods

This study employed a self-administered survey to gather all the relevant input from the respondents.

MApEC

This is an application which is developed and used as a pre-language learning tool to facilitate students outside class hours, and to help them prepare prior to the actual language lessons. MApEC can be accessed through mobile devices where most of the content can be made available offline. At present, the application consists of 8 main features, namely course info, about us, contacts, download, reading, writing, dictionary and podcast.

Instrument

A set of questionnaire was used to evaluate respondents' perceptions as well as their level of satisfaction towards the use of MApEC in general, and as a pre-language learning tool. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A was the demographic profile which consisted of 2 items while Part B consisted of 13 items of a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree and 5=strongly agree), multiple choice and open-ended questions. The open-ended question was added to seek for respondents' qualitative input with respect to the areas of improvements to the application.

Respondents

A total of 29 Semester 1 Diploma students from a selected higher institution in Negeri Sembilan participated in this survey. They were from three Diploma programmes in the institution (Diploma in Food Technology, Diploma in Microbiology, Diploma in Textile Technology). The selection of students was based on convenient sampling and consent was first obtained from their respective lecturers for them to participate in the study. Below is the breakdown of the respondents involved.

Table 1. Respondents of the study

GENDER	NO. OF RESPONDENT	PERCENTAGE (%)
Male	7	24
Female	22	76

Data gathering

First, the respondents involved were briefed about the objectives of the survey by the researchers and they were encouraged to ask questions if they have any enquiries pertaining to the survey. Then, they were guided by the researchers on the installation of MApEC on their mobile phones. Once the installation was completed, they were given one week to explore the application on their own. They were also informed to make use of all the relevant information provided in MApEC as preparation prior to their actual language class. Following this, the link to the survey was sent to each of the respondents one week later to get their feedback on the use of MApEC as a whole and as a pre-language learning tool.

Data Analysis

Since the study is descriptive in nature, and the main purpose was to get students initial feedback on

the use of MApEC in general and particularly as a pre-language learning tool, the data collected from the survey were analyzed by using simple statistical analysis. Thus, results of the survey will be presented descriptively.

Results and Discussion

In general, results of the survey indicate that majority of the respondents show positive feedback towards the use of MApEC. Figure 1 shows more than 50% of the respondents (i.e 55.2%) perceived that MApEC is user friendly and therefore easy to use. Only 17.2 % responded that MApEC is very complex to use (see Figure 2).

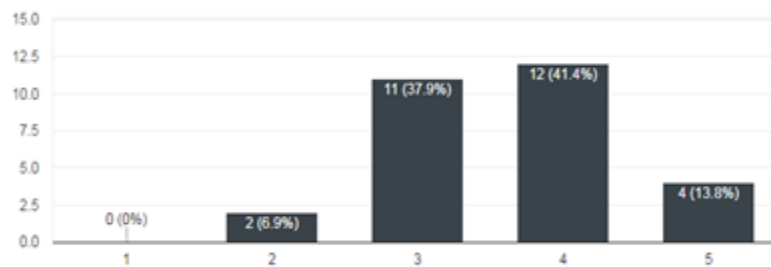


Figure 1. Easy to use

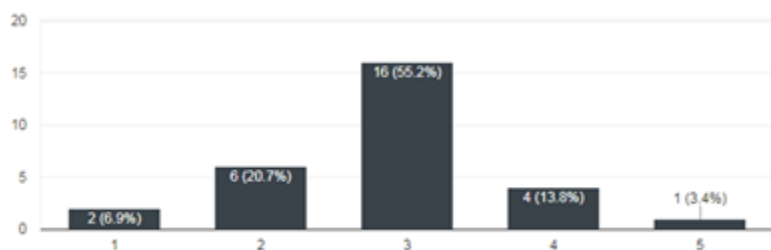


Figure 2. Very complex to use

Figure 3 below further illustrates respondents' feedback with respect to MApEC as a user-friendly language learning application. The graph clearly shows that 65.5% of the respondents perceived that 'easy to use' application is the greatest strength of MApEC.



Figure 3. Strengths of MaPEC

Figure 4 shows that 41.4% of the respondents were unsure on the various useful functions of MApEC. Despite this uncertainty, most respondents (51.7%) perceived that the various functions of MApEC are useful for them. This indicates that features provided in the application (e.g course info, reading, writing, dictionary, etc) are useful features to prepare students prior to the actual language class.

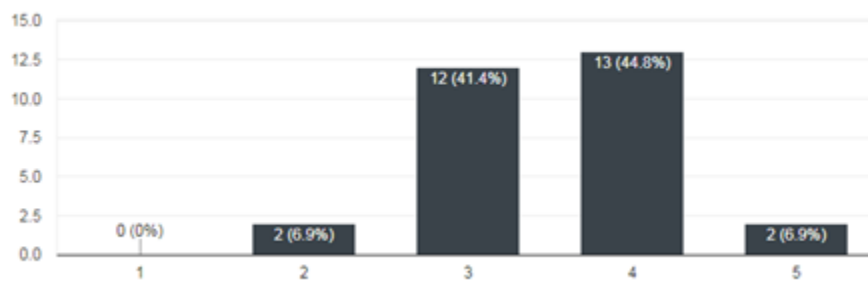


Figure 4. Various useful functions

More than 50% of the respondents agreed that MApEC is a very useful pre-language learning tool that facilitates them in group discussion that they do outside class hours. This is confirmed from the results of the survey in which 58.6% of the respondents agreed that MApEC is a useful reference tool when they do group discussion (see Figure 5). One possible reason is undoubtedly due to the readily available information in MApEC that they can refer to at anytime and anywhere. 34.8% of the respondents perceived that MApEC helps them to be prepared for language lessons in class (see Figure 6).

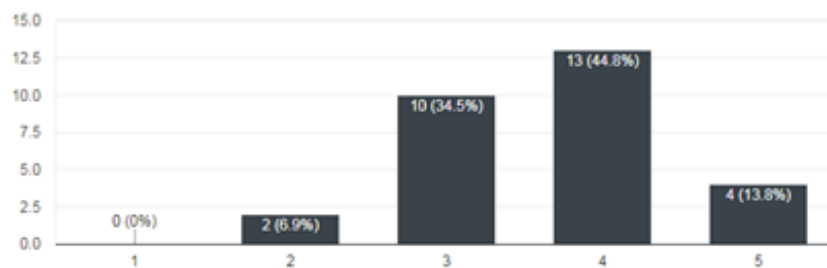


Figure 5. Useful for group discussion

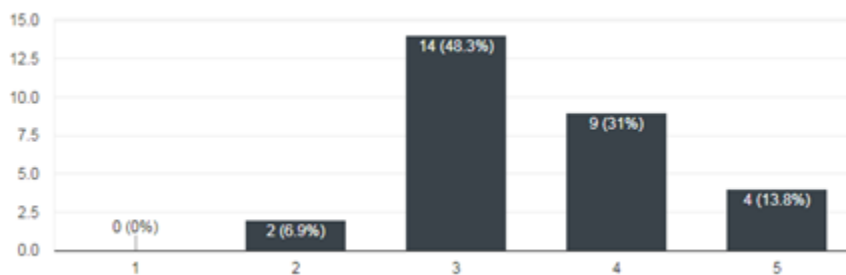


Figure 6. Ready for lessons in class

Figure 7 demonstrates respondents' feedback on the various functions available in MApEC. 71.4% respondents rated 'reading notes' as the most helpful feature in MApEC. This is not surprising as language learning requires students to do a lot of reading (notes) to prepare them for lessons in class. The next highest percentage (48.3%) is 'dictionary'. This is due to the fact that students commonly rely on dictionary to further understand materials they are reading and the readily available dictionary in MApEC probably contributes to the high percentage of respondents agreed that 'dictionary' is another very helpful function in the application.

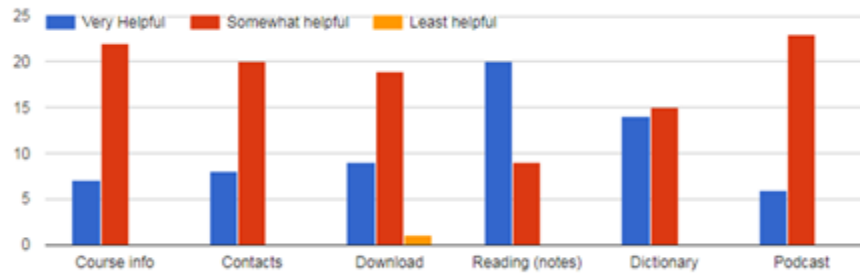


Figure 7. Feedback on the Various Functions of MAppEC

Despite the usefulness of MAppEC, 57.1% of the respondents perceived the drawback of MAppEC is it requires internet access to function (see Figure 8). This may be due to the fact that some of them were not aware that most content of MAppEC can be accessed offline. Students do not actually need internet access for all the features available on MAppEC since large input can be easily accessed offline. Internet access is only required for the installation of MAppEC and for obtaining extra information from the given links.

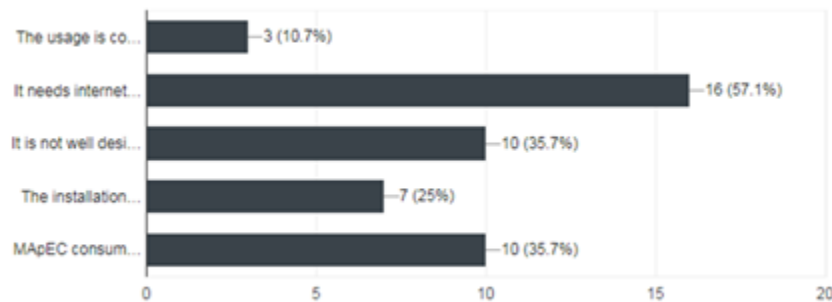


Figure 8. Weaknesses of MAppEC

Besides the 8 readily available functions in MAppEC, results of the survey indicate that 50.1% of the respondents suggested videos, and 31.4% of them recommended online chatting to be added to the application as an added value to MAppEC as a pre-language learning tool (see Figure 9). This feedback is very important to further improve MAppEC in terms of its features and functions so that it will be more useful to students.

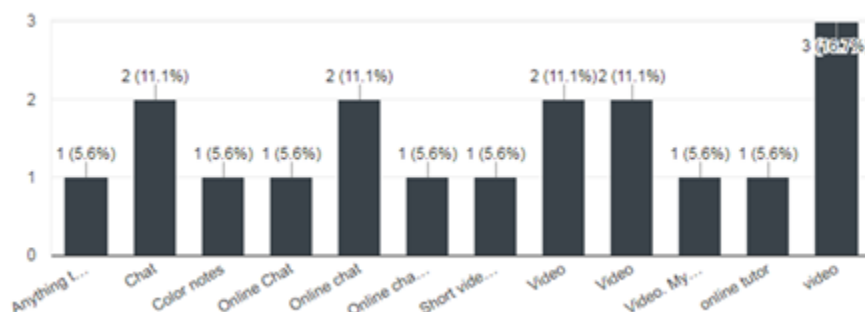


Figure 9. Features to be added

Results of the survey also reveal that, in general, respondents showed positive feedback and were satisfied with the use of MAppEC as a pre-language learning tool (see Figure 10). More than 50% (i.e 56.7%) of the respondents reported that they would recommend this application to other students (see

Figure 11). With further improvement and addition to MApEC, there is a high possibility that this application will receive much better feedback from students in future.

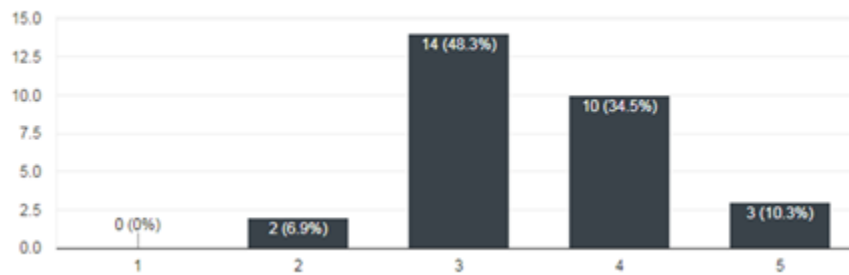


Figure 10. Satisfied with MApEC

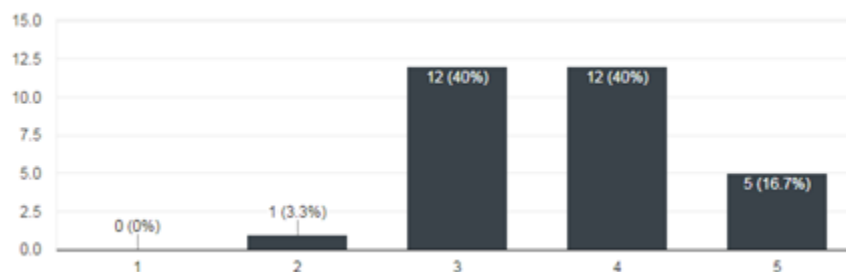


Figure 11. Recommend MApEC to others

To summarize, results of this preliminary study clearly show that MApEC received positive feedback from the respondents mainly because the tool is user friendly and convenient, and most importantly it can be used as a reference tool in students' group discussion and to prepare them for lessons in class. However, MApEC needs to be further developed and improved with respect to its contents, functions and features to ensure that it would be a more helpful and meaningful pre-language learning tool for students.

Conclusion

The aim of the study is to investigate learners' perception on the use of Mobile Application in English Course (MApEC) in general, and as a helpful pre-language learning tool to help them prepare for the actual language class. The students agreed that as a pre-language learning tool, MApEC is a useful reference tool in group discussion and in preparing them prior to the actual lessons in class. Apart from that, the application is perceived as especially being handy and user-friendly, as it does not fully require online connection. The positive response from learners on the use of MApEC collaborates with the research findings by Ali and Hassan (2014), Ehsan et al. (2013) and Hsu (2012) on the effectiveness of MALL as a language learning tool. Therefore, the respondents' optimistic level of acceptance and satisfaction towards the use of MApEC as a pre-language learning tool can be considered as the first step in developing this application into a more advanced stage.

As MApEC is still in its initial stage, the limitation lies in the limited input and features. Thus, future initiatives will include improvement in terms of information and notes as well as the additional features in MApEC suggested by the respondents. In addition, the number of respondents in the present study is considerably small; hence, it is suggested for future research to consider a larger number of respondents so that results will be more conclusive and reliable. Further investigations into learners' perception on the use of MApEC and the effectiveness of the application towards learners'

overall learning of the English language skills can also be carried out.

As the future of MALL in Malaysia is promising (Mohamad & Muniandy, 2014), the potential of MAppEC being a useful pre-language learning tool is visible. With further improvement to the application, it is hoped that this application can move a step further into becoming an invaluable tool to facilitate students not only in pre-language learning, but also in other language learning activities.

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