The Effects of Using Online Applications to Teach Vocabulary to English Learners of HUFI in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

This research aims at analyzing the outcome and effectiveness of applying several mobile apps or websites to teach and learn vocabulary in a particular university in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Under the era of technological bloom and advances in mobile applications, teaching and learning English is certainly facilitated by these tools; as a result, many teachers use some apps, such as Kahoot, Quizlet, Quizizz, and so forth. In order to engage their students to learn and review lexical resources. This paper discusses how deeply and effectively online apps influence the way Vietnamese teachers teach lexicon to students and how they should be used in further context to maximize the efficacy of teaching new words. In this article, the author uses semi-structured interviews with six different interviewees who are currently lecturers at HUFI university in HCM city. This embraces questions about frequency, efficiency, self-judgment, and their ideas about this issue. Results indicate that vocabulary learning apps have a strikingly profound and meaningful impact on teaching and learning, facilitating students' learning process and enhancing vocabulary retention. The study also provides recommendations for the use of mobile applications in teaching vocabulary.

Keywords: mobile apps, teaching and learning vocabulary, technological advances, vocabulary retention.

Introduction

In this day and age, using technologies in a classroom setting is proliferating around the world. Teachers and educators have a high tendency to utilize mobile-assisted teaching and learning systems to facilitate students' L2 learning, such as English (Parvin & Salam, 2015). Also, it can be easier and more convenient for students because they can easily bring a mobile gadget along with them to study when they study at school (Klimova & Polakova, 2020). As Stockwell (2010) commented, new versions of technological devices are more useful than older ones. Using a mobile phone to learn a second language enhances students' learning, for both those who learn by themselves and those who work with the teacher's instructions in class (Lee, 2014). There are some reasons why just mobile phones are mentioned in this study. Firstly,

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mobile phones are the "widespread infiltration of the market" (Stockwell, 2010). Another culprit would be that phones are usually portable and affordable compared to other devices such as laptops or computers. The last reason is that a vast majority of phones today are smartphones that can connect to the Internet, so they significantly support learning in class and vocabulary in particular.

Learning a second language means learning all skills, like writing, speaking, reading, and listening. Besides, aspects such as vocabulary and grammar are also considered to be able to get fostered if they are taught via mobile applications. This study focuses on vocabulary because the author believes that teaching vocabulary is the most significant step to help learners become more competent in the target language.

Mobile apps that are about to be used to interview teachers are Kahoot, Quizlet, Quizalize, and Quizizz. These apps are pretty prevalent to learners and teachers because they can be used to teach or review lexical items, expressions, or idioms.

Literature review

This topic is not new among many other scholars who used to investigate the benefits of using mobile apps to teach vocabulary (Basal et al., 2016). Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) highlighted that mobile learning could accommodate social contact and collaborative learning, but in their study, they encompassed some equipment like mobile phones, handheld computers, tablet PCs, MP3 players, podcasting, digital voice recorders, and multi-functional mini-camcorders.

Oberg and Daniels (2013) shed light on the issue of the positive attitudes of students towards learning autonomously at home with the support of an iPod touch-based instructional method. In this case, the authors concluded that students from the experimental group presented a better result compared with their counterparts from the control group. Because the former group learned with iPod, they can refer to the materials anytime they want, and they can access tasks multiple times, while the former one learned traditionally with the teacher's instructions. Nowadays, there have been about over 1000 to 2000 language learning apps (Sweeney & Moore, 2013). In addition, positive vocabulary acquisition was also recorded in the study by Burston (2015). Students showed satisfactory learning outcomes when using mobile apps to learn vocabulary at both schools and at home. Students have a chance to review vocabulary more thoroughly via apps. They can self-study at their own pace, pay more attention to personal goals and needs, or set up their own learning timetable (Nisbet & Austin, 2013). Also, the integrated use of mobile applications to teach and learn vocabulary and phrases could greatly boost language learners' learning capabilities (Klímová & Berger, 2018). Not only do online applications help students enjoy their lessons in class, but they also motivate them to independently study at home, increasing the likelihood of remembering new words later (Chen & Chung, 2008; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Poláková & Klímová, 2019).

Research conducted by (Kohnke et al., 2019) in Hong Kong concluded that students taught by mobile-assisted language learning apps show superior performance and memory of new words

about business topics, giving rise to a higher level of vocabulary retention. Similarly, the language accuracy was also proved to improve with the advancement of lexis, which was imparted via online learning apps (Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Pham (2022) confirmed positive results of using the Quizlet app for vocabulary learning, albeit the fact that he only mentioned and measured results via one application, so a broader spectrum of various applications needs to be tested in order that findings could be more reliable.

However, some researchers like Heil et al. (2016) stated that teaching vocabulary via online technology in this modern era still tends to be taught isolated rather than in a context because they said there was "little explanatory corrective feedback, and there is little adaptation to the needs of individual learners" (p.49). Therefore, they recommended that mobile apps had better be designed and developed to serve the communicative purpose of learners and reinforce students' reflexes on acquiring language and culture. Furthermore, a synthesis study conducted by Nguyen (2021) revealed that learning new lexical items with the support of social media, such as videos, a digital computer games, and mobile applications, make great contributions to vocabulary acquisition; however, there was still no mention about different levels of students or class sizes.

This study investigates how efficiently online language learning apps can help teachers teach new lexical items in the context of a state-funded university in which each class has a large number of students (over 50 students).

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are mobile applications applied in English classes at HUFI university in Ho Chi Minh City?
2. What are the effects of inserting applications in teaching vocabulary in English classes from teachers' perspectives?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The participants are six individual lecturers/teachers currently teaching English at a public university and some private English centers in Ho Chi Minh City simultaneously. They have years of experience teaching English in general and applying online-based applications; as a result, most of them are accustomed to using technology in the classroom with the aid of mobile-assisted language learning apps to teach and revise vocabulary. Because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviewing process was conducted online via phone calls which were recorded and saved for further usage.

Instrument

This paper was designed to use semi-structured interviews since the author wanted to direct participants more closely while they were still allowed to express their thoughts and responses

about their use of online apps (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003) freely. The interview contents comprised 6 main, open-ended questions and some follow-up questions that may be improvised according to participants' answers. Below are six primary and fixed interview questions:

1. How often do you use a mobile app to teach vocabulary in class?
2. What are the apps that you use?
3. What are the effects that you notice on your teaching? (maybe both positive and negative)
4. What do you like and dislike most about these apps?
5. How do these apps improve students' performance of learning and remembering English vocabulary?
6. Is teaching vocabulary traditionally much better than using mobile apps?

These interviewees were discretely interviewed by making individual phone calls. And they were chosen randomly to call.

Results/Findings and discussion

The great integration of smartphone applications into teaching new lexical items in the class.

With respect to the first question, 5 out of 6 teachers have used mobile language learning apps to teach vocabulary in class, with frequency ranging from sometimes to very often. In their responses, they show apparent interest in applying technology in the classroom:

> *Almost in every lesson, I use the mobile apps or some kinds of websites (Teacher 2)*
>
> *I sometimes use mobile apps to teach vocabulary (Teacher 3)*
>
> *Due to the Covid-19, we have to stick to online teaching; therefore, I tend to use a lot of apps to teach vocabulary to everyday classes (Teacher 6)*

And the most frequently used online-assisted teaching and learning apps that interviewees use to teach lexical items embrace Quizizz, Quizlet, and Kahoot. Although different people may use many other apps, these three are the most popular in the teacher's community.

> *I often use Quizizz or Kahoot because they have many functions (Teacher 6)*
>
> *The app that I always refer to is the Kahoot app (Teacher 1)*
>
> *Every time I teach vocabulary, I use mobile apps, such as live worksheets or Quizizz more often (Teacher 4)*
>
> *I sometimes use mobile apps to teach vocabulary, such as Quizlet, Kahoot, or maybe Quizizz (Teacher 3)*
>
> *Gimkit, Kahoot, Quizizz, Quizlet, I use that vocabulary apps(Teacher 5)*

All of the participants give positive thoughts about inserting online apps to teach new words in class. They emphasize that online language learning apps help to generate an interactive, engaging, and motivating learning environment. Specifically, students become more excited

and active in learning new English vocabulary. In addition, mobile apps also exert an optimistic influence on students' attitudes, triggering their curiosity and incentive to absorb a new list of words.

> *I think that the effectiveness is ok, and I think I can draw a lot of student's attention to the lesson, and they participate in the class a lot [...] arouse students' interest and trigger their curiosity (Teacher 3)*
>
> *It is quite in the middle, an app like Kahoot is exciting at the beginning (Teacher 1)*
>
> *This is an effective way to engage students into the classroom, and I can adapt students' understanding [...] I try to incorporate as much as I can (Teacher 5)*

Another effective factor is that online apps are convenient, colorful, eye-catching, and user-friendly, so they have made a huge contribution to creating a positive experience for English learners; as a result, they get more eagerness and engagement toward new lexis. Moreover, convenience is also displayed in the way students work. Whether they work with individuals or as a team, their results have been recorded and tracked by teachers, allowing teachers to acknowledge how much they might proceed.

> *Usually, I would provide students with new vocabulary via Quizlet, but I also use Quizlet to let them play some games - a kind of checking vocabulary (Teacher 2)*

Teachers show both positive and negative effects of mobile vocabulary learning applications.

Question number four illustrates the discrepancies among the answers of attendees because they explained a variety of reasons why they like or dislike apps they have been using. The most observed reason for being fond of apps would be mobile apps were functional. They could be used as a teaching tool in the class, a tool to check homework, or even a means to deliver mini-tests with the help of many types of questions, including multiple-choice, true-false, and matching drop-and-drag questions.

> *It is user-friendly, and it offers many functions for me to decide the questions. For example, I can decide on multiple-choice questions, true-false questions, and short-answer questions. (Teacher 6)*
>
> *These apps offer different ways to teach children. For example, Quizizz, I like that it offers open-ended questions to let students write whatever they think. Moreover, Kahoot, on the other hand, students have to arrange all items so that they get the clause. (Teacher 5)*

The second popular choice for applying apps to deliver new words is teaching, and learning apps were strikingly supportive for their preparation stage. Teachers can refer to readily available online resources on the apps/websites to design or re-use activities; teachers just need to prepare once, and then they can re-use easily anywhere and anytime. Furthermore, there were also other explanations, such as flexibility, providing an easy atmosphere for students and teachers, and enhancing friendly competitiveness among students.

> *When you use the apps, there are many available resources for you to use. For example, there are a lot of other exercises designed by other teachers on websites. You can learn from them, and you can have a new idea, or you can even use their exercises (Teacher 4)*

> *Because students like competitions, because those apps – are designed for students to compete with each other, and they have a lot of visuals (Teacher 6)*

Nevertheless, there is only one feature that all teachers do not like of learning apps. The fact that apps must be upgraded or paid for the premium version to use full functions can turn out to be a financial burden for many.

> *What I don't like is that I have to pay. I don't like it because they want me to pay a huge amount every month. (Teacher 5)*

> *They have to require me to upgrade my account, and I have to pay the fee for an upgrade to access more functions. (Teacher 6)*

Additionally, one teacher reported that using mobile apps could become an enormous distraction for students because some students used their phones/tablets to surf the web or social networking sites in lieu of focusing on the tasks assigned, and this might be one thing that hinders this teacher from using it too often.

> *Some students make it very distracted because they are really into the game competition. Some of them might ignore some kinds of knowledge. (Teacher 3)*

These online learning apps could be only efficient for the first time used then later, when teachers re-use them; students are more likely to be less interested, according to one teacher.

> *An app like Kahoot is really exciting in the beginning, like it allows the class to play it for the very first time, and things will run very smoothly […] but is not guaranteed on their second or third time. (Teacher 1)*

Next, the interview teachers' outcomes shed light on the fact that many students significantly improve vocabulary retention. And they measure the results by giving students short tests, lexical quizzes, or composition exercises that require them to produce sentences using new words. Surprisingly, several teachers highlight that students can still remember new words when they have learned via mobile apps, and then they are able to use them correctly and properly in a sentence.

The final idea is a comparison between the traditional teaching method of vocabulary and using mobile-assisted learning apps. 4 in 6 participants agreed that there should be an integration between two types of teaching in order to maximize the learning outcome and experience in the classroom. In other words, whether learning online or learning in the physical classrooms, applying updated mobile apps while teaching vocabulary and using conventional methods will together guarantee a noticeably better result, improving students' memorization and spelling.

> *They can remember vocabulary and grammar more than in traditional ways. (Teacher 6)*

Whereas the two remaining said that traditional method had better be prioritized before the use of online apps because of distraction factors. Mobile vocabulary teaching apps should be regarded as additional tools to make the lesson more interesting and long-lasting. One suggested that apps could be used to teach complex and abstract lexical items while it is not necessary to use them to teach simple and easy terms.

Discussion

Broadly speaking, mobile-assisted language learning, or MALL, has been a prevalent term in the educational field. Many scholars around the world - with a substantial increase in studies published in 2008 - have conducted a variety of researches to enhance a deeper understanding of the development of handheld devices that facilitate authentic, mobile, flexible, and contextual settings (Duman, Orhon, & Gedik, 2014; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Chinnery (2006) states the upsides of using mobile apps in general, "they can be just as easily utilized outside of the classroom as they can in it; learners can study or practice manageable chunks of information in any place on their own time, thereby taking advantage of their convenience" (p.13). Specifically, online vocabulary learning apps, such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Educandy, Blooket, Quizalize, etc., have gained certain popularity among teachers and educators (Davie & Hilber, 2015).

The findings of this research clarify the values of online language learning applications. Although being discussed in many other studies, the results once again strengthen the usefulness and worthiness of applying mobile apps to delivering vocabulary English lessons, especially in the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviewees consistently align with important aspects of vocabulary improvement when they use mobile learning apps to teach lexical items for online classes, encompassing vocabulary absorption efficiency, lexical memorization, active learning atmosphere, and measurable learning process. Furthermore, teachers also agree on the point that mobile apps can be taken advantage of to review old words effectively. Another pivotal viewpoint is that apps are not only used for while-learning classes (both online and offline), but also applied to assign homework for students to review and self-study at home.

On the other hand, some stumbling blocks of these mobile vocabulary learning apps are mentioned by teachers. They put an emphasis on the commercial aspect of many learning apps nowadays, which means that teachers have to pay for the annual packages if they want to use the full functions of these apps. Albeit useful, this aspect causes obstacles for some financially disadvantaged. Another trouble interviewed teachers may encounter is that they are afraid of the fact that mobile apps could be counterproductive in some cases because they are distracting students from learning well in class. However, teachers are fully aware of this situation, and they try to handle and control the problem as much as they can so that they are able to optimize the benefits of language learning mobile apps.

The results of this study strongly confirm the positive effects of mobile-assisted language

learning via apps on teaching and learning lexicon. It seems to have the same result as a study carried out by Davie and Hilber (2015). They concluded that mobile apps like Quizlet have the potential to foster language learners' motivation.

Even though this research does not emphasize strengthening social contact like Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), they also share one common thing: better collaboration among students because this cooperation could be displayed through games or competitions hosted by teachers on mobile vocabulary learning apps. Learner autonomy is another factor. This study showed when students in a public university did a vocabulary quiz on their mobile phones or when they were assigned to do a quiz as homework, and they had to do it on their own (Oberg & Daniels, 2013).

On a global view, mobile learning apps strikingly assist vocabulary retention, especially difficult words. To be more precise, students at all levels can drive benefits from learning vocabulary through mobile apps; language learners could feel more motivated and incentivized to focus on learning, making better progress in vocabulary memorization (Chen & Chung, 2008; Lee, 2014; Masrai & Milton, 2015; Kohnke et al., 2019). Mindog (2016) shares the same viewpoint with this study since it affirms that using smartphone apps will help to improve vocabulary and spelling as long as students desire to use the apps frequently. She writes on the idea that "It would seem that participants' inter- mediate language proficiency allows them to focus on understanding the content without worrying too much about individual words or grammar" (p.16).

Likewise, mobile vocabulary learning apps also demonstrate huge and positive impacts of mobile-assisted L2 word learning on language learners (Lin & Lin, 2019; Le, 2021). This research supports this result consistently with these two main points. Firstly, the mobile application learning mode is superior to the learning mode in a traditional context since apps provide more flexibility and creativity to learn for both teachers and students. Secondly, the rate of word retention thanks to experiencing smartphone apps is noticeable, although low-level students still depend on instructors more than higher-level peers who are more active and eager to learn with apps (Davie & Hilber, 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2011).

Conclusion

This study has strengthened online apps' pivotal role in teaching new words in the classroom. The author would like to emphasize the benefits that both teachers and learners can receive from using apps to deliver new lessons or review old lessons. It presents motivating factors, effectiveness, and foreseeable outcome of learning new lexical items via apps. Learners are more likely to get engaged in the learning process. Nevertheless, several drawbacks related to money matter, and copyrights of these apps become burdens for teachers. As a result, some pedagogical implications should be listed.

First and foremost, teachers had better use apps to impart new words selectively, depending on the topics or needs or students' levels. Secondly, although students are driving more benefits from vocabulary learning apps, they need to be controlled or appropriately instructed to not get

lost or distracted from concentration. Last but not least, the basic package of these apps could be optimized when teachers know how to exploit them without having to pay more money to upgrade accounts. Otherwise, teachers can share an account to save the cost.

Also, some limitations of this study are objectively recognized. The size of the interviews is not large enough to guarantee more objective and comprehensive results. In addition, interviewees were asked via phone call, and they did not know the interviewing questions in advance; thus, some of them may not remember as much information as they could about their usage of apps. Thus, more in-depth research should be done in the future. Besides, further investigation can be helpful in the following topics: the use of digital devices in the process of learning other productive skills (speaking and writing); and a quantitative study on aspects of online apps influencing learning performance: design, content, interface, and user-friendliness.

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