



**EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES OF USING MOBILE  
LANGUAGE LEARNING APPLICATIONS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores English language teachers' perceptions of mobile applications and challenges in using them. The study uses data from 10 English languages teachers working in secondary schools and universities in Kazakhstan. Thematic analysis is employed. The findings suggest that teachers value availability and student engagement offered by mobile apps. The challenges of using mobile apps tend to be beyond teachers' control and include internet issues or lack of equipment. Policy implications for teacher training and professional development are discussed.

*Keywords:* mobile applications, English as a foreign language, teacher cognition, perceptions, challenges.

### *Introduction*

Mobile technology, which offers a revolutionary approach to teaching, is one of the most appealing technologies. Mobile devices have been gradually included into studying in recent years. The widespread usage of smartphones and other portable and Wi-Fi devices has transformed the conventional teaching approach and learning process (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). The widespread use of mobile devices has resulted in a plethora of mobile applications for English language teaching. There are several applications accessible for language learners to download via convenient internet access. Because of the mobility and accessibility of mobile devices, learning materials may be conveniently accessible.

Mobile learning refers to the use of mobile and portable technology in the teaching and learning process, such as PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants), smartphones, tablets and etc. With the advancement of wireless gadgets and technology, this is expected to be an increasing trend. The next wave of mobile learning will be widespread, with learners becoming more mobile and capable of studying across several devices (Ally & Prieto-Blázquez, 2014).

### *Review of literature*

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL)

Mobile-assisted language learning is considered as one of the units of M-Learning and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). According to Kukulska-Hulme (2009), Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is a phrase used to describe a group of technologies intended



at increasing creativity and cooperation, notably through social networking. The growing usage of mobile devices in recent years has resulted in the creating MALL, which differs from CALL in its use of personal, portable devices that enable new modes of learning, stressing continuity or spontaneity of access across multiple contexts of use. The researchers also claimed that MALL possess with these major characteristics: portability or mobility; social interaction; individuality; context sensibility.

#### Mobile language learning applications

Mobile phone usage has changed dramatically, beginning with the download of a ringtone and progressing to the use of many software on a single phone. Though mobile learning is not a new concept, the latest mobile devices with enhanced functionality have piqued the curiosity of many instructors in using this new technology into their classrooms. The iPhone, iPod, and iPad, as well as other new portable devices, are fueling the mobile app fever (Godwin-jones, 2011).

A mobile app is a type of software which are designed to operate on iPhones, tablets, and other mobile devices. The number of mobile language learning applications are increasing day-to-day. They can be downloaded from the App Store (IOs), Google play (Android) Windows Phone Store (Windows), and BlackBerry App World (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017).

Some of the mobile language learning apps are free to download, while others need payment. The most popular mobile language learning applications are Duolingo, Preply, Memrise, Rosetta Stone and etc (Parr, 2021).

#### Positive sides of using mobile applications

Since mobile applications became one of the teachings and learning instrument for learning English, the researchers around during their research about mobile applications identified the advantages of mobile applications which can influence positively to the learning process. One of these benefits is considered to be mobility of mobile phones. According to the study by Kukulska-Hulme (2009), mobility is believed to be one of the minor advantages of mobile phones. The device gives both teachers and learners an opportunity to study at any place (home, café, outside, outside of the classroom and etc.). Despite to the fact that the researcher described the mobile phones, the mobile applications run with the help of mobile devices and the users can use their mobile applications wherever they want (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009).

Another possible benefit might be entertaining lessons. Given the importance of motivating English learners (Nurshatayeva, 2011; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020), making the kessonns more fun



and enjoyable has considerable importance. With the help of mobile applications, it is usually easy to make the learning process entertaining. Moreover, it is possible to make competitions between the learners, since majority of the applications are game based. As an example, the teachers can use Kahoot, because this application is based on providing lessons with attractive design and games which this application possess.

Since majority of people in the world possess with at least one smartphone, usually there is no issues with using mobile applications. Mobile phones are easy to use, as the learners are familiar with the gadget and teachers do not always spend their time on instructing how to use mobile applications correctly.

The various choice of mobile applications on the internet help both the teachers and learners to choose the right application which is useful and comfortable for all themselves. According to Gangaiamaran and Pasupathi, the number of mobile applications in the world are increasing nowadays. In addition to their statement, they claimed that despite to the fact that premium version of mobile application has benefits, the free version of those applications are effective too (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017).

#### Negative sides of using mobile applications

In spite of the positive sides of mobile applications, using mobile applications in both teaching and learning process have negative sides. One of the main issues is considered to be the weak internet connection. Since all modern mobile devices have the internet access, the mobile applications for teaching and learning English are required to be used with the internet connection. The issue usually arises when the teachers want the learners to use mobile applications to do an assignment and learners do not have an access to the internet. The reason for that might be the fact that the learners at school are not provided with the internet connection, despite to the fact that each school use an internet connection. As an example, Michael Onyema conducted study on the pros and cons of utilizing mobile applications in Nigeria, and in his research report, he stated that learners and teachers frequently suffer with network troubles. Teachers sometimes struggle with planning activities for students since students must wait a certain amount of time in order to connect correctly, as online learning necessitates a high-speed internet connection. (Onyema, 2019).

Next challenge might be lack of mobile phones or outdated mobile phones. Despite to the fact that most of individuals possess at least one device, there are cases when the learners do not



possess with mobile phones. This is because, some parents are not always able to provide their children with mobile applications. According to Onyema (2019) buying mobile gadgets are affordable in the present era, most families cannot afford to buy mobile phones to their children, as some families in underdeveloped countries might still live in poverty (Roe et al. 2008; Nurshatayeva, 2020; Weidman & Nurshatayeva, 2018). Even if the learners possess with mobile phones, some learners are not provided with the latest models of mobile phones. Despite to the fact that out-of-date mobile devices are able to run on mobile devices. There might be some issues when these gadgets are used during the process. For instance, the oldest models of mobile phones have small screen size, which gives troubles to the learners as the keyboards in this phone are small sized and it is difficult to type. In addition, these mobile phones have issues with memory storage, since the numbers of mobile applications are increasing and they are updated regularly. Since they are updated the size of the applications are increasing, too. Due to insufficient memory capacity, it is sometimes difficult to install the applications on these phones (Cervantes, 2021).

Another challenge might be not knowing how to use mobile applications correctly. In spite of the fact that majority of student possess with mobile phones and know how to use them correctly, there were some cases when the learners did not know how to use the mobile application, and teachers had to spend their time on instructing the learners how to use the applications.

According to the researchers, overusing mobile applications can be disadvantage for the eyesight. Since the screens of mobile phones produce rays, they damage the eyesight if they use them too much (Green,2019).

### *Methodology*

Because this research is qualitative, the researcher will explore instructors' perceptions and obstacles of adopting mobile applications in the methodology section of this research. For this study, the researcher used qualitative research. This technique allows participants to consider their responses and contribute more information than would be gathered only through quantitative methods (Mollaei & Riasati, 2013).

### Research questions:

To explore teachers' perceptions, their experiences and challenges of using mobile applications, the researcher used these research questions:

What are EFL teachers' general perceptions of using mobile applications?

What are the advantages of using mobile application by the EFL teachers' points of view?



What are EFL teachers' challenges of using these mobile applications?

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The main objectives of this research were: to examine EFL teachers' perceptions of using mobile applications in teaching process, explore teachers' perceptions of advantages of these technological tools, and to learn about the challenges that the teachers experienced in utilizing the mobile apps. To explore EFL teachers' perceptions, the researcher used the semi-structured interview.

After sending the invitations to participate in the research along with the consent letters, the researcher met with participants face-to-face and the interviews were conducted one-to-one. Audio recordings were made of each interview.

Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis in this research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2018). While and after transcribing the interview recordings, salient themes were examined and synthesized.

#### *Participants*

10 EFL teachers in Kazakhstan were invited to participate in interviews. The main criterion for choosing participants was their level of English – above intermediate and their experience of using mobile applications in the teaching process. Among participants, there were 7 secondary teachers working in both state and private schools and there were 3 university level teachers.

#### *Findings*

##### Recognition of the potential of mobile apps to enhance student engagement

To check teachers' perceptions of using mobile applications in teaching process, the teachers were asked about their attitudes towards them. The findings revealed that the majority of the teachers, specifically 7 of them, were positive about using mobile languages; however, three respondents were negative towards using mobile applications in teaching process.

The majority of the respondents claimed that using mobile language learning applications in teaching process can bring benefits to both teachers and learners too, as the mobile applications can make the teaching process and engaging; however, some respondents claimed that despite positive sides of using mobile applications, using them in teaching process is difficult.

##### Apps that are more familiar are most in use

During the interview the teachers were asked about their preference of mobile applications which they use or used in their teaching process. The majority of the respondents claimed that they



use Kahoot, Quizziz, and Quizlet on their lessons, as these applications are well designed and easy to create assignments and tasks. Some applications also claimed that they used social network applications for the teaching process. The vignettes below illustrate this point:

*Mostly I use Quizlet in my teaching process, since with the help of this application I usually save my time and with its functions I can create interesting quizzes to my students, since they like using this application (participant 8)*

*Especially I really love quizzes as it has an automated feedback function. When I was a student, I always wanted to get immediate feedback as I was eager to know why a particular answer was correct. So, first students tick the answer and after they get feedback with an explanation (participant11).*

The respondents claimed that they selected specific applications to use in their teaching based on various rationales. Most commonly, they were using the applications they knew how to use. The know-how came from either learning from colleagues or from teacher training seminars they attended in the past. This suggests that teacher-training professional development is an important channel through which policy-makers may influence technology use by English teachers. This also suggests that there is an unmet need in technology training among EFL teachers.

An advantageous mobile app combines availability with student engagement

The teachers who participated in this study found that the availability of mobile apps made them so advantageous to use. Being easily and freely downloadable, having an easy interface, and features that are easily usable in teaching were valued by all participants. Thus, availability is what mattered most to the participants.

Next, all teachers highlighted that availability alone doesn't make mobile apps useful in teaching English. Rather, it is a combination of availability and opportunities to enhance student engagement that turn mobile apps into powerful tools teachers choose to use in class and beyond. The extracts below demonstrate this:

*I got such benefits from using mobile applications as observing the progress of my students, assessing students according to their performances, making students to speak and conducting interesting and inspiring lessons (participant 4)*

*For me mobile applications are great in terms of using them whenever you want. The learners can do the assignments while they are at home, and the teachers can give them assignments with the help of mobile applications. As an example, I used a mobile application called Quizziz and asked*



*my student to accomplish the task. The students reported me that only some of them completed the task inside the class, whereas the others completed them outside of the classroom (participant 5)*

Tech issues major challenge in using mobile apps

The challenges teachers experienced in using mobile apps turned out all to be related to technology issues. The most commonly mentioned ones were the internet connection issues and some students not having mobile phones.

All teachers who participated in the study experienced internet connection or access issues. Even mobile data passes wouldn't solve these difficulties. Interruptions caused by the slow or intermittent internet often disrupted class or even forced teachers to switch away from mobile apps.

Yet all teachers would still continue using mobile apps despite the internet issues. Most often, they would simply ask students use the mobile app for homework where students and their mobile app use wouldn't be constrained by the school lesson duration. That is, even the slow internet and interruptions would allow students use the mobile app in the quiet of their homes while benefiting from the advantages offered by mobile apps.

Another tech challenge was simply that some students didn't have or bring their phones to class. In such cases, the lesson could not go as planned. Often teachers would ask students to share phones or give their own phones to the student/s who didn't have the phone. The vignettes below illustrate these points:

*Since all these mobile applications work only via the Internet, respectively, the most difficult part is the problems with Internet access or connection. Also, as we know, it's no secret that we can't always provide our students with a good quality Internet connection. This can affect the teaching and learning processes (Participant 10).*

*There were cases when I allowed my learners to work in teams and do online research on a particular topic. Unfortunately, some students distracted others by using mobile for peripheral purposes and checked their social media, like Instagram, tiktok (Participant 6).*

*Discussion and conclusion*

This study qualitatively examined EFL teachers' perceptions of mobile applications and their advantages and investigated their challenges in using mobile applications in teaching English.

The thematic analysis showed that teachers recognize the student engagement potential of mobile apps. That is, if mobile apps are not used as much as the policy-makers expect, it is



definitely not because teachers do not understand the value of mobile apps. Their perceptions of availability along with engagement potential indicate that teachers are also very practical in utilizing apps in teaching, that is, they are far from using mobile apps just for the sake of using them. Rather, they are considerably savvy about what they expect from mobile apps. Further, the fact that teachers select apps they know something about or know how to use indicates that teacher training is key in promoting the use of mobile apps in teaching English.

The exploration of challenges teachers faced suggests that tech issues pose the biggest challenges. This is quite surprising as it's not teachers' lack of training or tech expertise but really the tech issues beyond their control that make the use of mobile apps difficult. This also suggests that teacher training programs are likely doing a good job in preparing teachers to use the apps. It is the tech infrastructure that fails to support their efforts in utilizing the apps.

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