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Students' Perceptions of Mobile Apps: A Needs Analysis of EFL Learners

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Abstract

In the current digital age, mobile apps are increasingly being employed to expedite the learning process. However, in order to incorporate mobile apps effectively into classrooms, EFL teachers must first be aware of the logistics of applying mobile apps. The purpose of this research was to investigate the current use of mobile technology in studying English and make recommendations for choosing apps for English learners in EFL contexts. There were 32 students of English Education department chosen as the sample for this study. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to find out their perceptions about the use of mobile apps and its current use in the classroom. The study revealed that most of the participants in the study highly appreciated the effectiveness of using mobile apps in their learning. Furthermore, the students were critical in selecting the appropriate apps that suit them and their learning purposes. Based on the study, the researcher found out the top five prevalent apps that students frequently used including *English Grammar Test*, *Duolingo*, *Busuu*, *kamusku* and *English Listening and Speaking*. The criteria of choosing the apps are ranging from the app relevant to students' need, the user-friendly app, the free of cost app, and the app with gamification features.

Keywords: Mobile apps, students' perception, mobile learning, mobile technology

Introduction

The growth of technology nowadays has contributed massively to almost every aspect of human life including the educational system. Some studies have shown that the integration of technology such as mobile devices in teaching and learning gives significant input to the students. Mobile learning has been considered as the revolution of e-learning in the teaching and learning process. Mobile learning enables students to study without any constraints of time and place; in other words, mobile learning can be a portable learning tool that support teaching and learning (Mehdipour and Zerehkafi, 2013). Similarly, Mueller, Wood, De Pasquale, and Archer (2011) conducted a research on students' learning with mobile technologies in and out of the classroom. They divided their study into two separate levels of study. The first study is conducted at university level to investigate the implementation of Blackberry device while the second study is in an elementary school to examine the integration of digital mobile technology in the form of iPod and iPad. From the two contexts of these examinations, they revealed that students' learning using mobile technology promotes students' curiosity and creates a fun learning atmosphere. It can be seen that the integration of mobile technology into the students' learning brings positive impacts as it helps students to be more aware and responsible to their learning. With this technology, students are able to monitor their own learning and develop their creativity as they can utilize the smartphone to access, search, and investigate any information related to their formal learning process and environment (Mobile Learning Network (MoLeNET) 2009; Gikas & Grant, 2013).

Mehdipour and Zerehkafi (2013) clearly mentioned that mobile learning open the possibility of formal and informal learning to take place. Mobile technology provides a lot of tools and resources that students will be able to access them anytime and anywhere. In this case, the technology has opened endless resources for any students wishing to boost their progress in learning. Moreover, Chen and Aimee (2013) had initiated a survey on students' mobile learning practices on higher education. The study was conducted in the Central University of Florida. They revealed that mobile learning with tablet was popular among students. Furthermore, the study showed that mobile learning occurred mostly outside the classroom with limited instruction from the teachers. It means that the students have been exposed to the target language by incorporating this device into language classroom.

One form of mobile learning is by utilizing a mobile app in teaching and learning a language skill or knowledge. A number of apps have been set to meet the objectives of language and skills. For example, some apps were intended to enhance students' English proficiency. Other apps were focused on a certain English skill including Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, or one area of the English knowledge such as Vocabulary, Grammar or Pronunciation. Responding to the rapid growth of the availability of mobile apps and the demand for effective curriculum, integrating these apps in language classroom, the EFL teachers should be aware of how students' use the apps and what are their perceptions on them.

Using mobile phones in learning has been unprecedented growth in Indonesian higher education. This is due to the fact that mobile phone has been the most widespread tool that almost possessed by anyone. Alamsyah and Ramantoko (2012) in their study on the implementation of m-learning in higher education in Indonesia stated that mobile learning has been part of Learning Management System (LMS) used widely in universities. Therefore, having adequate understanding on the chosen apps to use in the classroom will be the most helpful strategy for the teacher and students in order to get the effective output in learning. Eppard,

Nasser and Reddy (2016) stated that it is been a challenging task to “determine a clear method for choosing apps.” Vincent (2000), however, in his blog listed some criteria for choosing educational apps after giving a series of workshops in Florida. His mobile app review checklist was referred to the one created by Palm Beach County Schools and Educemic.com. He believes that the more checklists an app received, the more effective the app can serve their purposes. Therefore, referring to his checklist, the researcher may judge if an app which is currently used by students has fulfilled the criteria of a good app and highly recommended from educators’ view. Some of the checklist are including the apps is relevant to the purpose and students needs, the app is free of charge, the content of the app is appropriate for the student, and the app that promotes creativity and imagination.

Apart from the benefits of mobile learning, Kim and Kwon (2012), in fact, conducted a study on the effectiveness of mobile applications for effective Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) environment. They reviewed 87 mobile apps designed specifically for ESL in 2012. Their study revealed that although mobile apps seem effective in promoting students-centered learning, most of the ESL mobile apps are cognitive focus and lack of collaborative learning opportunity.

However, although extensive studies have been carried out regarding students’ perception on the learning with mobile apps in ESL context, there were still limited studies on the students’ perceptions of mobile apps in EFL context, especially in the ASEAN countries. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring students’ perceptions on learning with mobile apps and their practices in enhancing students’ language learning at Institut Parahikma Indonesia (IPI), Gowa.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current use of mobile technology in studying among students and to find out students’ perceptions on the use of mobile apps in learning English.

Participants

The participants in this study were the first-year students of English education in the faculty of teaching and instruction, which consisted of 32 students from two classes. These participants were considered very low in the English Proficiency. This was based on researcher’s experience teaching them from the very first semester. None of students got any standardized score such as TOEFL or IELTS due to their level of English yet they have been prepared for the tests by the end of their study in the program. The high score on TOEFL or IELTS has become one of the goals of the English program at Institut Parahikma Indonesia. The students are expected to be able to continue their study abroad.

Instruments

The researcher used a questionnaire using Google form and semi- structured interview to find out students’ perception on the use of mobile applications in their learning. The link of the Google Forms and the questions of the semi-structured interview are shown in the appendix.

Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data based on the result of Google Forms and semi-structured interview. The use of these two instruments in collecting data helped the researcher to analyze the data easily. After the researcher sent the link to the students and asked to fill them online, the results appeared in the form of charts and graphs for the multiple choice questions and list of answers for the questions requiring short answers. To illustrate, Google Forms presented information on (1) the frequency of students use apps; (2) student criteria for apps selection; (3) the English skills and knowledge that students want to improve; (4) whether or not students need teacher's guidance in using the apps; (5) difficulties students encounter when applying apps to their learning in the form of bar and pie charts. The charts showed the percentage of each multiple question, which made it easy for the researcher to analyze the data and report the result. In this case, the researcher could identify the most favorable apps the students use as well the categories of choosing them while the result of the interview from some participants provided more detailed information regarding the students' perception on the use of apps.

There were three questions addressed in the interview. The answers from participants were indicated with a number. This number was based on their name order on the excel sheet when they submitted their answers into the Google Forms. The first question was asking the apps they use in their study. Most of the students gave similar answers regarding the most favorable apps used in their learning to improve their English. The applications that became the most favorable ones were *Duolingo*, *Memrise*, *Busuu*, *English Grammar Test*, and dictionary applications.

The second and third questions were about the reasons why they liked and disliked them. For example, the participant number [27] mentioned that *Duolingo* and *Busuu* were the most favorable apps as they had gamification features and thus giving him the feeling of playing games when he use the apps. However, some technical issues such as how to use the apps and the paid content of some apps made some students feel annoyed. Another problem they mentioned was about the ads, which frequently appeared when they played with the apps.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: Do the participants use mobile apps for learning English?

In this question, from 32 responses, 26 participants (81,3 %) use mobile apps for learning English and only six of them (18,8%) study English without mobile application. Those who do not employ mobile applications in their learning, prefer listening to music or watching Western movies, using a computer or digital dictionary to assist them in learning English.

Research Question 2: How do the participants find apps effective and in what ways?

Regardless of some difficulties faced by the students in using the apps, most of them say that using mobile applications help them studying English more effectively and efficiently. The result of my deep interview with some students reveals that mobile applications enable them to study anytime and anywhere.

[20] I really enjoy playing with the apps. My favorite ones are *Duolingo* and *Busuu* because I can practice my listening and improve my vocabulary.

[11] I like using *Busuu* because it helps me to improve my pronunciation and the most important thing is that the app trains me to be more careful and aware especially in

answering the questions in test. For example, if I miss one letter just, it gives wrong answer so I have to be careful and more attentive.

[27] I like mobile apps such as *Duolingo* and *Busuu* because I feel like I am playing a game when I use it. It is really interesting

However, some students also mentioned some difficulties faced in using the applications. Most of them complained about the premium content that they couldn't access because they need to pay [5], [11], [27]. In other words, the apps that they used are not free or cheap. Another issue found in this study is that the access of Internet which is still difficult for some students. One participant [19] said that it is really difficult to use the online apps in isolated area or area with bad signal. Another one [20] admitted that playing online games and social media is more preferable than using mobile apps for learning English. In addition, advertisements, which pop up while using the free apps were annoying for some participants.

Research Question 3: How long do the participants spend on using apps?

The time spent using the apps varied for each participant. In this question, the participants were asked regarding the time they spent on using the mobile app. The result can be seen below.

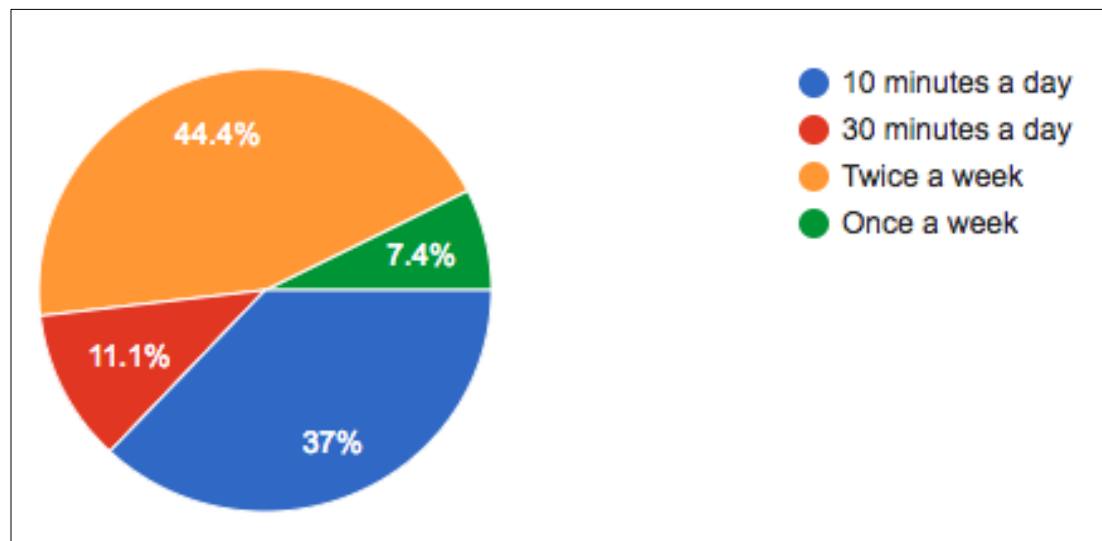


Figure 1. Frequency of app use

The figure above shows that mobile apps are used mostly twice a week by 44,4% and 10 minutes a day by 37%. 11,1 % of the participants uses apps 30 minutes a day and only 7.4% of them uses the apps once a week. It can be concluded that the interest in using the mobile apps is quite high for students at Institut Parahikma Indonesia.

Research Question 4: What kinds of apps that students often use improve their skills and knowledge?

There are various mobile applications revealed in this study based on the skills and knowledge. They are presented and discussed in the following tables.

Table 1.

Listening skills

There are 54 different apps that the students mentioned in this study. The top five of them are listed in the following table.

No	Name of listening apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	Busuu	5	16%
2	English listening	3	9%
3	TOEFL Listening	2	6%
4	Duolingo	2	6%
5	Memrise	2	6%

The most frequent app used by the participants to improve their listening skills is *Busuu*. This is also in line with the results of the interview with some students about their experience using mobile applications in learning English. The responses of the interview can be seen below.

[5] I really like to use *Busuu* app Ms., because it has listening part. I can listen to the words and then practices my pronunciation. The test is also very good-especially the spelling part. I learn to be more careful in spelling.

[3] First, I added *TOEFL Listening* in my phone because I was curious. However, after using it, I liked it and I can learn new vocabulary too. The app is good.

Table 2.

Reading skills

List of apps students use to improve reading skills are listed below:

No.	Name of reading apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	Busu and Duolingo	1	3,13%
2	Schooling Me	2	6,25%
3	Chat to Learn English	1	3,13%
4	Hello English	2	6,25%
5	Text Fairy	1	3,13%
6	Practice English Learning	1	3,13%
7	English Grammar I	1	3,13%
8	Bookmate	1	3,13%
9	English Reading	1	3,13%
10	text book	3	9,38%
11	English Grammar Text	3	9,38%
12	Read Era	1	3,13%
13	Google Translate	1	3,13%
14	U-Dictionary/Cambridge	1	3,13%
15	English Reading Practice	1	3,13%
16	Kaskus, Line	1	3,13%

From the data collected, it is revealed that 68,75% participants employ various or some apps to improve their reading skills. About 8 participants (25%) do not use any application but prefer news websites, Google translate and some textbooks to practice their reading skills. The rest of the participants (6,25%) do not use any application at all.

Table 3.

Speaking skills

The following is the list of some apps that the students use to improve their speaking skills.

No.	Name of apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	Busuu	1	3,13%
2	Pronunciation dictionary	2	6,25%
3	Just try to speak	1	3,13%
4	English grammar, Duolingo and Busuu	1	3,13%
5	SchoolingMe	1	3,13%
6	English listening and speaking	1	3,13%
7	English listening and speaking, Kamusku, Busuu	1	3,13%
8	Duolingo, Busuu	1	3,13%
9	Busuu, Dualingo, Hello English and Pronunciation dictionary	1	3,13%
10	Memrise, Busuu, SchoolingMe, and TOEFL test	1	3,13%
11	Hello English	1	3,13%
12	Hot8	1	3,13%
13	English conversation	1	3,13%
14	Busuu and SchoolingMe	1	3,13%
15	Pronunciation Dictionary	1	3,13%
16	Virtual speech, pronunciation power	1	3,13%
17	English speaking lesson	1	3,13%
18	English speaking practice	1	3,13%
19	English speaking	1	3,13%
20	Learn to speak	1	3,13%
21	English Grammar Test	1	3,13%
22	U-dictionary	1	3,13%
23	English conversation	1	3,13%
24	Youtube, Skype and Camfrog	1	3,13%

The table shows that especially for speaking skills, several apps can be identified. Almost all participants (27 out of 32) give their responses and it seems like each participant uses a different app. However, *Busuu* is the most popular app for speaking skills. The 4 remained participants (12,5%) do not use any apps to improve their speaking skills.

Table 4.

Writing skills

List of apps students use to improve writing skills is as follows.

No.	Name of apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	English tense	1	3,13%
2	Duo lingo and Busuu	1	3,13%
3	SchoolingMe	1	3,13%
4	English writing skills and rules	1	3,13%
5	Chat to learn English, Hello English	1	3,13%
6	Duolingo	1	3,13%
7	Busuu, English grammar test, Speedy English grammar, and English study	1	3,13%
8	English Grammar I	1	3,13%
9	Hello English	1	3,13%
10	Hot8	1	3,13%
11	English Writing	3	9,38%
12	Busuu and SchoolingMe,	1	3,13%
13	English writing skills	1	3,13%
14	English grammar test	2	6,25%
15	English grammar	2	6,25%
16	English writing skills	1	3,13%

The table shows that among 32 participants, there are only 20 (62,50%) participants employs writing apps. *English Writing Skills* becomes the most used app followed by other apps such as *Busuu*, *SchoolingMe*, *Duolingo*, *Hello English*, and some other grammar apps. The rest of the participants do not use any apps for writing and the following is some of their responses.

[14] I don't use any apps to improve my English writing because I just make some notes and quotations every day.

[20] I don't have any applications about writing.

It can be seen that there are not many writing apps identified in this research, which means that the availability of the specific apps for writing itself hasn't varied yet. Other apps such as *English Grammar Test* or *Busuu* are used to correct their grammar in order to get better sentences construction in writing.

Table 5.

Vocabulary skills

List of apps students use to improve vocabulary skills is discussed below.

No.	Name of apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	English Grammar Test	6	18,75%
2	Kamusku	3	9,38%
3	Vocabulary Builder	1	3,13%
4	Oxford dictionary, Cambridge dictionary and My dictionary	1	3,13%
5	SchoolingMe	1	3,13%
6	IELTS Vocabulary	1	3,13%
7	Kamusku, Hello English, Busuu, Chat to Learn English, English Grammar	1	3,13%
8	Duolingo, Learn English Vocabulary	1	3,13%
9	Cambridge Dictionary, Kamusku, English Study, Pronunciation Dictionary	1	3,13%
10	Criminal Case Game	1	3,13%
11	Hello English	1	3,13%
12	Ox. En. Dict.	3	9,38%
13	Busuu App, SchoolingMe, Hot8	1	3,13%
14	English Vocabulary	2	6,25%
15	English Tenses	1	3,13%
16	Common Vocabulary	1	3,13%

It can be seen from the table that although *English grammar test* is the most frequent app used by the participants to improve their vocabulary, almost all participants have dictionary app installed in their phone. One of the participant said that dictionary is so handy to use whenever he needs to check a new word. There are some useful dictionary apps identified such as *Oxford Dictionary*, *Cambridge Dictionary*, *Pronunciation Dictionary*, *My Dictionary* and an Indonesian-English dictionary called *Kamusku*.

Table 6.

Grammar skills

List of apps that students use to improve grammar are shown below:

No.	Name of grammar apps	Frequency (out of 32)	Percentage
1	English Grammar Test	10	31,25%
2	Learn English Grammar and English Grammar Test	1	3,13%
3	TOEFL Test and English grammar Test	1	3,13%
4	SchoolingMe	2	6,25%
5	<i>Latihan</i> TOEFL	1	3,13%
6	English Grammar Test, Hello English	1	3,13%
7	English Grammar Test, Duolingo, English Grammar test, Busuu, Speedy English Grammar, Hello English,	1	3,13%
8	Hello English	1	3,13%
9	Hot8	1	3,13%
10	English Tenses	4	12,50%
11	English Sentence Structure	1	3,13%

In this section, most participants use *English Grammar Test* to improve their grammar. This is the top most used app in this section. Of the 32, only 4 participants do not use any apps. One of the participants [32] said that he doesn't use his phone to learn grammar because he prefers to learn from books or listen to a teacher's explanation. There are some interesting features that the participants mentioned about the apps. Most of them said that they enjoy using the applications especially the *English Grammar Test* when they study structure because it is easy to understand. This app provides them with clear explanations and a lot of important grammar points. Another item that the students like is that the practice or the test has labels on each question that helps them easily and quickly identify the grammar point. For example, each question in the test has the name or label of the item tested such as present perfect or prepositions or other topics. They said that they could directly spot which answer they should focus on to make sure it will be the best answer.

Research Question 5: What are the criteria for choosing the apps?

The study reveals some criteria of choosing the apps. The result of the Google Form as illustrated in the pie chart is clearly shown below

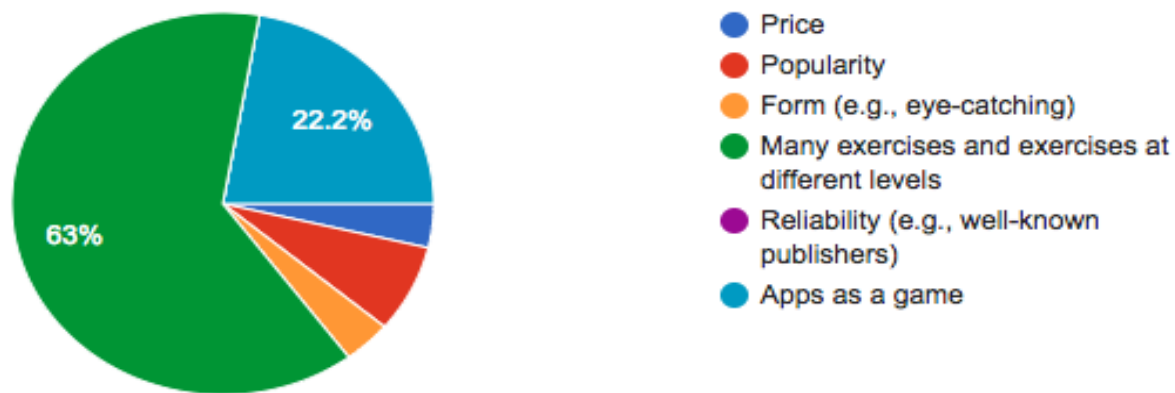


Figure 3. Criteria for choosing the apps

The figure above shows that 63% of the total participants use the application based on the exercises or tasks at different levels. This means that they use the apps based on their needs or relevancy to their subjects. The following criteria for choosing the apps is that the apps as a game. Most of participants enjoy playing the apps because they find it as interesting and challenging as playing games.

[23] I like playing game. That's why I love the apps. *Duolingo and Busuu* are my favorite ones.

[24] English grammar test helps me to get more explanation about structure.

[32] I like to use the apps because it helps me to improve my listening.

Based on the overall data, it can be seen that the students use a certain app according to a certain skill or an English knowledge that they learn. Mobile applications are used to assist them in getting more information about the subject they discuss or learn about.

Discussion

The use of mobile application in learning English has raised positive feedback from students at Institut Parahikma Indonesia. Mobile application in learning can help to solve difficulties in their English learning more efficiently as they can learn anytime anywhere. Before conducting the pilot study, most of students at Institut Parahikma Indonesia did not use any application to learn English in their cell phone. They simply used the cell phone for communication and interaction with social media. After conducting the pilot study and introducing the applications to be used to improve their English, students became more enthusiastic, motivated and curious to learn English. The study revealed that about 81,3% of students employed mobile apps in their learning English language. This number is considered high to conclude that there was a positive response toward the usage of mobile apps, and therefore, would be a significant input to students' English learning.

Mobile applications have become supplementary materials in the compulsory subjects such as reading, structure, listening and so on. Thus, the students choose the application based on the task given or on the skills or elements of English the participants want to improve. The mobility of cellphone enables students to access more information easily. The fact is that the students at Institut Parahikma Indonesia still have limited exposure to the target language, as English subject is taught only about 90 minutes per meeting. Therefore, the students find mobile application helps them to get more opportunities to explore learning materials and improve their knowledge.

Among the apps revealed in this study, *English Grammar Test* is the most used app to improve grammar and vocabulary in addition to some *dictionary* apps. While other apps such as *Busuu* and *Duolingo* were used to improve other English skills including speaking, listening. The most popular app for writing skill is *English writing skill* regardless at the limitation of choice. The researcher also found out that most of students do not need assistance or guidance from their teachers in using the apps. Therefore, using mobile application in learning English can promote independent learning.

It can be seen from the data collected that the teachers should recommend the apps based on these criteria including but not limited to the relevancy of the apps to the subjects matter that students learn, the presence of gamification features, the popularity or user friendly and free of cost. The criteria used in this study to choose the apps supported by the checklists proposed by Vincent (2012). Furthermore, the result is also in line with the analysis of Eppard, Nasser, & Reddy (2016) in their study showing that recommended apps should consist of “sharing, engaging, thinking skills, customization, relevance, culture cost, ease of use and collaborative” features. Although some applications have been suggested in this study to be used in learning English, the teacher should continue searching and evaluating some useful apps to be recommended in the English language classroom. Therefore, teacher recommendations of some applications enable them to still monitor students learning and their progress with the app even though it is not set up for the formal learning situation. This study could become a suggestion for the teachers or policy makers at Institut Parahikma Indonesia or other educators in EFL contexts to consider the benefit of mobile learning for students.

Conclusion

Mobile applications are useful in assisting students learning English. Students at Institut Parahikma Indonesia gave positive responses related to the use of mobile applications to support their learning. *English Grammar Test*, *Duolingo*, *Busuu*, *kamusku* and *English Listening and Speaking* are the common apps used that the students employ in their learning. The criteria of choosing the apps are ranging from the relevancy of the apps to the subjects matter that students learn, the presence of gamification features, the popularity or user friendly and free of cost apps. Spending some time outside the classroom to learn English with mobile applications can improve not only students' cognitive skill but also their self-confidence. Therefore, for the teacher of English, especially in developing countries such as Indonesia, it is highly encouraged to recommend some suitable mobile applications to students to improve their learning, as the content of mobile application can be authentic materials for them. This source will boost students' motivation and curiosity, which eventually support independent learning for all students (Mueller, Wood, De Pasquale, & Archer, 2011). Besides, considering the fact that students in EFL contexts lack exposure to the target language, the emergence of mobile

technology will undoubtedly extend students opportunity to learn or access various English sources through their phone.

Future research

To get more comprehensive data regarding mobile apps in language classroom, more research are needed in this field. It is suggested for the future researcher to see the effectiveness of mobile apps in relation to students' performance.

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