Mobile Language Learning Applications from the Perspectives of Adult Language Learners in Turkey

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Abstract

Mobile language learning applications have changed how language is learned and have opened new windows for potential learners. At the convenience of our time, place, comfort and pace, we can learn or revise a language through our mobile gadgets. From the reviewed literature, it is evident that more data is needed to understand the users' views about mobile applications. Instead of focusing on a single mobile application, the researcher attempted to elicit the general perceptions of Turkish adult learners about mobile language learning apps. In line with this thought, a self-administered questionnaire was sent to potential mobile app users and 231 participants replied to the questionnaire. The aim of this study is to find out what perceptions adult learners in Turkey have and what their suggestions are to enhance future mobile language learning applications. For the close-ended questions, frequencies and percentages were taken, while for the open-ended question, content analysis was done. Easy access was considered as the greatest strength, while internet connection requirements and scarcity of interactivity were considered among the shortcomings. The participants offered some suggestions which can yield new paths for application developers, teachers and practitioners in the field of English language teaching and adult learning.

Keywords: **Mobile learning, Mobile applications, Language learning, Mobile-assisted language learning, Mobile devices, Learner experiences.**

Introduction

Equipped with Wi-Fi access, mobile phones have extended their basic function beyond simple communication and have become smarter. One can turn their smartphone into a learning resource. Kukulska- Hulme (2006) underlines mobile learning is an umbrella term that defines learning associated with mobility. In the reviewed literature, there are various terms such as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), apps, and game or gaming (Castañeda and Cho, 2016). As Kukulska-Hulme (2006, p. 119) puts it, mobile learning "is no longer in the preserve of technical experts and researchers with specialist knowledge." Mobile apps intertwine language with technology. Learners and teachers can benefit from mobile learning promises easily as it extends learning beyond classrooms. In Rodríguez-Arancón et al.'s (2013, p. 1190) terms, the use of mobile apps "will contribute to the establishment of more just and equitable societies" by offering individuals with life-long learning opportunities no matter where they are.

There are many benefits of mobile apps. To name a few potentials, learners have 24/7 access to mobile apps to foster their language learning without being restricted to formal/traditional learning environments (Wang, 2017). They can use mobile apps in addition to formal learning environments, or they can use apps without attending any formal learning environment. In this sense, "mobile technologies are a powerful means of opening up learning to all those who might otherwise remain at the margins of education" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010,

p. 184). Mobile language learner apps bridge formal and informal learning environments (Hsu, 2013). Mobile language learning apps also provide immediate feedback at the end of each exercise so learners can internalize the correct forms more easily (Castañeda and Cho, 2016).

On the other hand, there are also some pitfalls in the use of mobile applications. Kamandhari (2015, p. 3) underlines the shift of responsibility to the learner and states that mobile language learning "offers fluidity, provisionality and instability where the responsibility rests upon the shoulder of the learners." As there is no teacher to guide them, it may cause some problems. Moreover, as Kukulska-Hulme (2009, p. 158) underpins, "in practice, there are issues of cost and usability that often stand in the way of such self-initiated mobile learning." Pareja-Lora et al. (2013, p. 208) point out that "some apps that are attractive to MALL users a priori do not necessarily have a sound linguistic content that is adequate for steady language learning." Moreover, users may feel distracted due to social media, text message notifications while using apps and this may lead to partial and fragmented learning (Rosell-Aguilar, 2016). Therefore, it may provide only superficial learning in some cases.

To add to the growing bulk of studies on MALL and its effectiveness, instead of focusing on a single mobile app, the researcher attempted to elicit the general perceptions of Turkish adult learners about mobile language learning apps. The following research questions are going to be answered in this study:
1. What are the Turkish adult learners' perceptions about mobile language learning applications?
2. What can be done to improve the current mobile language learning apps?

Method

In this study, participation was voluntary. Before the actual questionnaire, it was piloted on ten individuals and questionnaire items were rephrased based on the piloting. Data were collected for over two months between December 2018 and March 2019 before the analysis began. 231 participants replied to the questionnaire. Using a questionnaire was seen suitable to reach potential users through social media by convenience sampling. The researcher did not mention any specific applications in the given questionnaire, but the aim was to get their overall perceptions of mobile language learning applications. The language of the questionnaire was Turkish and their replies were translated into English by the researcher. For the close-ended questions, frequencies and percentages were taken, while for the open-ended question, content analysis was done.

Participants

As for demographic information, 44.2% of the participants (n=102) were female, while 55.8% (n=129) were male. A high majority of the participants (n=189) who replied to the questionnaire were 18 and 30 years old. It is understood that young people are the ones who make most of mobile language learning apps. They can use their mobile phones everywhere, at school or out of school context, to enrich their learning experience.

As for the occupations of the participants, 27.4% of the participants (n=63) were undergraduate students, and 28.4% of the participants (n=65) were postgraduate students. It was seen that a high majority of participants were undergraduate students, postgraduate students, engineers and teachers. It comes as no surprise as students are trying to improve their foreign language skills to maximize job opportunities in the future. For engineers, English has been deemed a prerequisite in today's competitive job markets. Teachers also use mobile applications to get information about the content before suggesting them to their students or other subjects. Teachers want to enhance their English to follow new trends and approaches.

Findings

The participants were asked how many mobile language learning apps they had. A high majority of the participants (n=97) prefer using one or two mobile language learning apps. 13.5% of the participants (n=31) have three applications, while 18.2% (n=42) have four and over applications. 26.4% of the participants (n=61) do not have any applications.

The participants were asked what language mobile apps they used. From the findings, it can be concluded that 85% of the participants (n= 196)

use mobile apps to learn/practice English. It is not surprising as English as a lingua franca has become pervasive from school to the workplace. In Turhan and Kırkgöz's (2018, p. 262) terms, "the unstoppable growing of English as the global language and the need to interact with varied people anywhere at any time" have become the motives for people to learn English. 5.3% of the participants use mobile apps to learn/practice German, while 3% (n=7) use mobile apps to learn/practice Spanish. The dominance of English is in line with Hwang and Fu's (2019) review study. They also found that English as a foreign/second language was the most common target language.

In another question, the participants were asked what mobile language learning apps they had used so far. Duolingo was a popular app among the participants. Among the most popular applications, dictionary applications can be considered popular for 40.3% of the participants (n=93). This is in line with the reviewed literature. In Luef, Luef, Ghebru and Ilon's (2020) study, dictionary apps were also the most commonly used ones. Dictionaries have an indispensable place in language learning. For 29.9% of the participants (n=69), Voscreen is a popular application. It is a type of application that offers language learners videos in the language they are trying to learn.

The participants were asked how they were informed about the mobile language learning apps that they used. Multiple answers were given. 64.9% of the participants (n=150) mentioned that they had been informed through their research. Social media is another platform through which mobile learners are informed. 42.9% of the participants (n=99) were informed through social media. Only 11.7% of the participants (n=27) were informed through formal learning thanks to their instructors/teachers.

In another question, the participants were asked how often they used mobile language learning apps. The frequency of app use differed greatly. Only 14.7% of the participants (n=34) are frequent users and they use mobile language learning apps regularly every day, while 26.4% (n=61) rarely use apps. Maintaining a regular habit of using mobile language learning applications needs effort and can be considered very challenging. Due to the participants' family, work, or school commitments, they may have difficulty using apps every day.

The participants were asked another question to understand their aims of using mobile language learning apps. It was seen that 49.8% of the participants (n=115) stated that they used mobile language learning applications to practice a language they were learning at that moment or had learned before. 23.4% of the participants (n=54) mentioned that they used mobile language learning applications to get prepared for nationally administered language tests or international language tests such as TOEFL, IELTS. The target group of these exams is mostly adults or young adults, and they take these exams for educational or occupational goals. 13% of the participants (n=30) utilize mobile apps to learn a new language. 11.4% of the participants (n=26) use various mobile apps to translate sentences or texts.

In another question, the participants were asked a question to assess to what extent mobile language learning applications contributed to improving their language level. They rated on a scale from a great deal to not at all.

Table 1: The Extent of Mobile Language Learning Apps' Contributions to Language Improvement

The extent of contribution	Number	Percentage
A great deal (5)	14	6.1%
Much (4)	50	21.6%
Somewhat (3)	94	40.7%
Not very much (2)	58	25.1%
Not at all (1)	15	6.5%

The percentage of the participants who find mobile apps not very useful was slightly higher than those who find mobile apps quite useful.

The participants were also asked to what extent they thought mobile language apps helped improve their vocabulary knowledge and language skills. A high majority of the participants (n=132) agreed that mobile language learning apps helped them to increase their range of vocabulary. This may result from the fact that mobile apps focus on vocabulary match, drill exercises starting from the very beginning. Mobile apps tend to focus on vocabulary teaching as it is believed that "if a person's vocabulary knowledge is richer, then s/he can better understand the structure

of the foreign language" (Agca and Ozdemir, 2013, p. 782). As Hao et al. (2019, p. 209) note, "it may have a positive effect on student vocabulary learning by routinely reviewing the learning content daily and decreasing student learning anxiety." A small percentage of the participants (n=12) believed that mobile language learning apps helped improve their writing skills. Writing exercises in the apps tend to remain mechanic at the sentence level. For instance, users often put the words in the right order. Therefore, those exercises don't help them much to improve their paragraph or essay writing skills. 12.1% of the participants (n=28) believed that mobile apps helped them to improve their reading skills. The participants agreed that mobile language learning apps helped them to enhance their listening skills. This is in line with Kim and Kwon's (2012, p. 46) study, which indicated that the content of listening applications is "diverse, authentic, and well scaffolded with transcripts or subtitles." In Azar and Nasiri's (2014) study, it was also seen that mobile devices had a positive impact on learners' listening skills. Only 6.5% of the participants (n=15) believed that mobile apps helped them to improve their speaking skills. This is in line with Kim and Kwon's (2012, p. 42) study; they found out that mobile apps "focus more on receptive language skills than productive and present more form-focused short language information." Kim and Kwon (2012, p. 50) further noted that "skills were not integrated actively to develop comprehensive speaking ability such as reading and speaking or listening and speaking (responding)."

Overall, the participants were asked how sufficient they found mobile language learning apps. It was seen that only 4.8% of the participants (n=11) found mobile language learning apps very adequate, and 59 participants rated them as somewhat adequate while 35 participants found mobile apps not very adequate and 16 participants found them inadequate. 47.6% of the participants (n=110) remained undecided/neutral about the effectiveness of mobile language learning apps.

In another question, the participants were asked about the strengths of mobile language learning apps. It was evident that most of the participants found easy access to mobile apps as a great strength. 25.5%

of the participants (n=59) considered mobile apps being free as another strength. For 28 participants, learner autonomy is one of the strengths evident in mobile language learning applications. As Hao et al. (2019, p. 209) suggest, "it can improve attitude towards self-disciplined learning and develop self-regulated learning skills."

Also, the participants were asked about the weaknesses of mobile language learning apps. There are also some challenges inherent in mobile language learning. 23.9% of the participants (n=55) mentioned that mobile apps function only when connected to the internet. Problems of connectivity and cost of connectivity make things difficult for mobile app users. 19% of the participants (n=44) complained that mobile apps did not have an effective teaching method. This is in line with the reviewed literature; Reinders and Pegrum (2015, p. 222) pinpoint that "the pedagogy tends to be rather traditional, leaning towards information transmission and especially behaviorism". Kim and Kwon (2012, p. 42) also identified the most frequently employed approaches in the apps as task-based, audio-lingual, situational and structural. 17.3% of the participants (n=40) addressed the problem of lack of interactivity. 16.5% of the participants (n=38) mentioned that mobile language learning applications appeal to beginner or elementary levels.

In the last question, the participants were asked about their suggestions to enhance mobile language learning apps. Multiple suggestions were given by the participants. 69.3% of the participants (n=160) suggested that mobile language learning apps should work offline and online. 68% of the participants (n=157) suggested that apps assess users' language levels at the end of each completed level. 38.1% of the participants (n=88) stated that it might be better to have a section in the apps where they can ask questions and get answers to them. 50.2% of the participants (n=116) would like to see mobile language learning apps more interactive. Further suggestions were providing unpaid limitless time to complete the specific level. The participants also recommended that there should be a specific topic for writing every week, and users can write their essays and submit them so that experts can correct their mistakes. They also noted that this could turn

into a game and the user with the highest scores could be announced. The participants would like to see more interaction with native-speaker teachers. They also suggested that the basic level should be the same for everyone, but further levels' contents could be determined by learners' needs. They would be happy to see a section where the users can interact with each other.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The number of mobile apps is increasing at a great pace. Mobile apps open up new promises for language learning beyond sitting in a classroom, and more and more people are downloading various applications to start or continue learning foreign languages. In this study, it was seen that the participants used their mobile language learning apps for learning foreign languages, specifically English. From the users' perspectives, the strengths and weaknesses in utilizing mobile applications were identified. To enrich the learning experience of mobile apps users, some amendments should be made. The possible changes should be introduced to mobile apps. For instance, new features which allow language learners to interact and negotiate with each other can be added to mobile apps. Another feature that gives language learners the chance to ask their questions to language teachers can also be added. Being available only online when connected to the internet causes some problems. Therefore, mobile apps developers may find solutions to make them function effectively offline, as well. Individuality is one of the factors mobile apps developers should take into consideration. There should be more focus on productive skills. In addition, teachers need to be informed about the merits of mobile technology to encourage their students to use it. In Ok and Ratliffe's (2018, p. 541) terms, "teachers need to use the same skills they wish to harness in their students to engage them in meaningful learning," so teachers should benefit from mobile language learning in their teaching practices.

As for the limitations of this study, the participants who replied to the questionnaire might have been the active ones on mobile technologies. The research can be conducted with many participants in different contexts to have more precise results. Therefore, the replies cannot be generalized. As a projection to future research, the current use of mobile language learning applications can be further explored by focusing on the users' opinions of specific applications. There can be more focus on other languages apart from English. Researchers can also focus more on the learning outcomes of applications with pre-and post-tests.

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