Smartphones to Learn English: The Use of Android Applications by Non-English Major Students in West Aceh

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SMARTPHONES TO LEARN ENGLISH: THE USE OF ANDROID APPLICATIONS BY NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN WEST ACEH

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Abstract

Smartphones multi-functionality and practicality features are very promising in helping students to learn English language. Numerous applications related to English enables the students to be exposed to English and learn independently and conveniently outside the classroom. This study explored students own use of android applications to help them in learning English. Specifically, it investigated the types of apps the students use, examined their motives in using the apps, and figured out how the apps were perceived to help in acquiring English. The study was conducted as a qualitative study involving 15 non-English majors students recruited from three different campuses in West Aceh. The data were collected through personal interview and focus group discussion that were transcribed and analyzed by coding and concluding the information into a number of themes. It was found that the students had used a number of android apps, particularly dual language dictionary apps to support their informal English language learning. The apps were considered very helpful as the students could access vocabulary and be exposed to English frequently. Easy access and practical use of apps were perceived as the major advantages benefiting the students in gaining vocabulary and other English learning materials to develop their English language skills.

Keywords: *Smartphone; Mobile Assisted Language Learning; Language learning Apps.*

A. Introduction

The integration of mobile devices in language learning had been studied within the area of MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) (Chinnery, 2006). It was referred to the integration of numerous types of wireless devices to assist learners learn a second or foreign language formally or informally (Kukulsma-Hulme & Shield, 2007; Nassuora, 2012; Martin & Ertzberger, 2013). Since its development in the mid1990s what constitutes of wireless mobile devices in MALL has evolved from the use of pocket electronic dictionary, cell phones, laptops, palmtops, handheld computers, to the utilization of smartphones and other recent personal multimedia devices with add-on applications (Park, 2011; Burston, 2013).

These days, smartphones are no longer a luxurious tool owned limitedly by a certain group of people. Their ownership along with internet accessibility are increasingly expanding in many countries, and the college students had long been recorded as its heavy users (Jones, 2002). This is not only apparent in developed countries but also in developing countries like Indonesia (Wahyudi 2015). The survey concerning internet usage conducted in 2016 reported 132,7 million Indonesians had been connected to the internet. This number indicated 51,8 % raise from the survey result of 2014 (Widiantanto, 2016). All these data are evidence that smartphones are increasingly used for different purposes every day by many Indonesians.

The popularity of smartphone is also observable in Aceh, the western part of Sumatra. Although previously Aceh was categorized as underdeveloped area and become the targeted province to be allocated with government funded (LPDP) scholarship for a few years, everyone who comes to Aceh these days will notice that many university students have owned a Smartphone and accesses internet on a daily basis as the access is available for free in most of campuses.

Nevertheless, one thing worth noting is that, "ownership of smartphone does not necessarily mean that they are being used for language learning purposes" (Barrs, 2011 p. 231). In addition, despite the increasing number of smartphone users among Indonesians, there have been only a few

studies found investigating the use of smartphones for English language learning purposes. In this regard, the study aims to explore the smartphone use among non-English major students in West Aceh, Indonesia and investigate how the students utilize the available free English learning related apps to support their English language learning.

B. Literature Review

Studies on the current trends of language learning has identified that language learners performed wide ranging activities to learn the target language. These activities were generally performed out of the formal course learning mediated by mobile technologies. Jones (2015: 5) referred these to informal language learning since the activities "take place outside an institution (such as a school, college or university); without a teacher and without that learning being assessed".

Many language learners were identified to value "the experience of learning a language while not being fully focused on it" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012: 5). Among the activities are having immersed in the target language by changing the setting of personal electronic devices interface into the target language (Chen, 2013) or use of their free time to do assignment, review learning materials or just simply watch movie, listen to music or songs, and play game while paying attention to the subtitle and use dictionary to figure out meaning of language expressions encountered (Bahrani & Sim, 2012).

The presence of Apple Apps Store and Google Play Store marked 'the rise of the apps' marked where countless of software applications emerged. Specific to English language learning, there have been numerous of apps covering all language areas; vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Each of the app comes with special features accommodating for the particular language skill area it focuses on (Kim and Kwon, 2012). With Android apps overtaking iOS apps, there has been even a more increasing number of English language learning app. Simply by typing key word of 'learn English' in app store, one is presented with plenty of options.

Gangaiamaran and Pasupathi (2017) classified the available English learning apps based on three category of users namely; primary, secondary, and tertiary learner. The primary group is for children of 3-10 years old. The apps belonging to this group content alphabet learning, letter recognition, different objects color and shape, and rhymes song. Some examples of apps are Pogg-spelling and verbs, Speech with Milo, Mindsnack, and Kid Learn to Read. Meanwhile, the secondary group is categorized for teens between 12 to 17 years old. In this group, the apps feature more parts of language acquisition. Among the good apps are Rosetta Stone, FluentU, Memrise, Duolingo, and Busuu. In addition, the tertiary learner is the group belongs to adult and college students. As college students are generally familiar with the use of mobile technologies, the apps in this category are more advanced like English Podcast for Learners, Voxy, English Listening and Speaking, and Learn English, Speak English Conversation.

Boja and Batagan (2009) asserted that the multimedia affordances of mobile devices and the creative work combining game with learning turn the learning activities more interesting and likely make the students feel less boredom. A more detail investigation by Ciampa (2013) pointed that the utilization of mobile technologies can be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivating for students for having six elements of motivation from Malone and Lepper (1987) namely; challenge, control, curiosity (coping with intrinsic motivation), cooperation, competition, and recognition (coping with extrinsic motivation).

In many studies, it was identified that students showed positive attitudes toward the learning supported with mobile technologies (Chen, 2013). They enjoy the practicality and flexibility offered by mobile technologies (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2009) and were more engaged in learning as it was fun and the learning activities fitted their social life (Bray & Iswanti, 2013). Furthermore, the students also reported to like the use of technology for learning because it presented the real world and assisted them to get more prepared to face the future (Li, 2007). In short, students' preference for learning with technologies

resulted from its special characteristics of fun, easy, and practical, as well as its benefits such as promoting learners to be more digitally literate.

C. Method

The participants of the study were 15 non-English major students recruited from three different campuses in West Aceh; Teuku Umar University (UTU), State Islamic College Teungku Dirundeng Meulaboh (STAIN TDM), and Nurse Academy of POLTEKES Meulaboh (Akper). These campuses were chosen because the students studying in these higher education institutions come from different regions of West Aceh and have diverse social background. The heterogeneity of participants were hoped to provide the study with rich information and data for better comprehension of the research questions proposed. The participants were recruited based on purposive sampling technique. This technique was applied because the study focused only on obtaining information concerning students' use of smartphone to learn English instead of making generalization for the whole group of students. In this regard, 5 students who possessed a smartphone and used certain apps to learn English from each college were considered able to provide information about the use of smartphone in learning English.

To collect data, two research instruments were utilized; individual interview and focus group discussion. Individual interview was carried as semi structured interview. It was conducted as the first stage of data collection that was carried as one-on-one interview where the researchers sit together with one participant at a time. There were 12 questions asked to each participant. The questions cover around students' perceptions regarding their use of android apps to support English language learning such as, "tell us what apps do you use to learn English", "why do you use this/these apps", "how do you think this/these apps help you in developing your English skills". The interview lasted around 10-15 minutes and all the answers were recorded using a digital recorder.

Focus group discussion was conducted as the second stage of data collection. This group session was meant to clarify the first data obtained from individual interview. It was also intended to come to the final stage

of condensing the data to figure out themes that might be the answers for research questions proposed. For this purpose, all the participants were invited to come to the interview session and were asked some questions that had been modified from those asked during individual interview.

Data analysis was performed manually instead of utilizing computer since the database for the current study was small (less than 500 pages of script) (Creswell, 2008). All recorded individual interviews as well as video recorded group discussion were transcribed. The researchers then read the transcriptions and coded them by highlighting some segments and writing a number of short statements in the margin that had been purposely left in the script. After the coding process was completed, the researchers summarized the codes and developed the common themes that represented all information obtain from the transcripts. The themes were linked back and discussed in relation to the research questions being proposed.

D. Research Finding

As there were three research questions proposed in the study, the findings here were organized in three sub-sections related to the questions of the study.

1. Apps the students used to learn English

Smartphone is increasingly becoming part of daily life that cannot be separated from the university students. "Whether they are welcomed right now or not, mobile devices are finding their way into classrooms in children's pockets" (AbuSa'aleek, 2014, p. 472). The interview and FGD with 15 participants of this study revealed that they have had a number of android apps installed in their smartphone to assist them in learning English. Some of the participants even had more than one apps and use them in combination as their resources in learning English. The apps were considered very helpful and effective to support them in learning English. Table 1 summarizes the types of android app used by the students participated in this study, what the apps were used for, and the motives for using the apps.

Table 1: types of app the students used

No	Name of apps	Used by	Used for	Motives
1	Indonesian-English Dictionary	3 students	• Searching for word meaning, • Translating phrases and sentences, • Checking for pronounciation.	• Desire to improve English ability • Practicality • Flexibility • Learning while having fun
2	Google Translate	9 students		
3	Kamusku	4 students		
4	Kamus LINE	1 students		
5	IDN translator	1 students		
6	Duolingo	1 students	learning some English language skills.	
7	Games; Clash of Clans, Slendrina	1 students	Playing games and obtaining new English words	
8	Lyric grabber	1 students	Listening to music while reading the lyrics	

As it is clearly appeared in the table, dictionary or translator apps were the mostly used app by the students. There were different five types of dictionary apps were reported. Google Translate stood as the most popular. Indeed, Google Translate was considered a distinguished translator app as it can perform translation in numerous modes including picture and voice modes (Godwin-Jones, 2011). However, the participants seemed unaware of these functions and tended to use it in a traditional mode by typing word(s) in the search column. Like the main function of dictionary in general, dictionary apps here were used to look up for meaning. Except for Google Translate that can do translation of a whole text, other dictionary apps were used limitedly to search for one word meaning and to listen to the pronunciation because the apps features were limited to these functions, especially in offline mode.

In addition to dictionary, Duolingo was another specific language learning app. This app focuses on vocabulary acquisition where users are introduced to new words or language expressions thematically and are trained to acquire them through diverse types of exercise (e.g matching English words with L1 meanings, filling in the blank space, writing the words by listening, and pronouncing the words). Furthermore, the app is designed in a game format, so users are given awards and bonuses as they accomplish certain levels and progress. Although Duolingo was one of good language

learning apps (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017), other participants seemed unaware of the app as only one participant reported to use this app.

The three other apps (lyrics grabber, Clash of Clans, Slendrina) were not directly associated with English language learning. Lyrics grabber shows songs' lyric, in which English songs' lyrics are accompanied with Indonesian subtitle. Meanwhile the games; Clash of Clans and Slendrina use English as the language of instruction. Interestingly, these apps were reported to be considerably useful by the participants in exposing them to English words and expressions, so they got familiar with English and became more confident when encountering with English in English class such as expressed in this comment from the interview, "*Playing game is like training your brain. I can get new English words and find their meaning in dictionary. So, in English class I am familiar with English words and I have had some experience with English*" *(Interview with IHS).*

2. Motives in using apps

In the FGD, all the participants were in agreement that they had poor English ability. This was the main motive for them to have the apps installed on their smartphone. Some of them like English very much because they love English songs, are fans of K-pop, and want to appear cool and 'international' on social media by showing that they understand posts written in English and can make posts in English. Whereas some others were not that fond of English but recognized the importance of English and the advantages they might have by mastering English. To depend on English class that was only limited for a couple of hours a week was thought insufficient. Hence, they were driven to put their own effort and find altenatives that can help with learning English as expressed by one of the participants, *I'm a big fan of K-Pop but I know very little English. I need dictionary to help me understand what other international fans wrote and discussed in soc-med and fan-page*"*(SFA in FGD).*

Although interested in English and eager to improve it, taking learning materials such as printed handout, book, or dictionary everywhere and all the time was considered not handy and burdensome.

The presence of today's mobile technologies and their software applications was considered as a more effective alternative. The students reported that using apps on their smartphone was very convenient since smartphone has become their "second half" that is taken everywhere and is hardly left. *"to bring dictionary everywhere is kind of a burden. I bring it sometime because the teacher required us, but the app is more practical because my phone is like my second soul that I take everywhere..." (IHS in FGD).*

Furthermore, special affordances of app such as providing instant access to vocabulary and audio feature enabling for pronunciation were perceived to make learning English more practical. *" you don't need to flip over the pages or look for the letter, just type the words and tap.. the meaning comes up" (Interview with ARM). "It's supported with audio feature, so I know how to pronounce words" (Interview with MAI).* The nature of app that is simple, easy to operate, practical, and always ready on the go appeared as the main contributing factors for the students considering app as an effective solution to assist in learning English independently. This finding had also been highlighted in numerous MALL studies (Chen, 2013, Kim, et.al., 2013; Jones, 2015).

3. Perceived benefits of using app

Although each student used different English learning apps, the students shared agreement in term of comfortability in using the apps to learn English independently. Practicality and flexibility in using the apps were regarded as the major advantages. The apps were not only used in the class but also at home and in other places where the students had free times. Similarly, the apps were not only used for the purpose of doing class assignments and tasks but also for the purpose of having fun like understanding song lyrics, playing games, or interacting and responding to friends on social media. *"In my free time I like to listen to English songs and read English story although only one or two pages. I used my dictionary app if I don't know the words" (Interview with DNA).*

Furthermore, the apps were also pointed to benefit the students in giving easiness in learning English. The students commented on the quick

access they had by using the apps. It was perceived very helpful in assisting them to figure out the meaning of English texts, how to pronounce certain English words, and to figure out the the word form when used in a sentence. *"I was improved with vocabulary and in understanding text. It was easier to translate sentences, and sharing with friends in the class felt good" (Interview with SFA).* The distinction of dictionary apps was also highlighted by Kobayashi's (2008) in which although the use of electronic dictionary did not increase vocabulary learning in term of retaining words meaning, it did facilitate textual comprehension.

Although the students were not sure and could not guarantee to get a better English grade, or that the good English grade they achieved were due to their use of the apps, one thing the students were convinced was that the apps influenced their confidence when encountering with English words and in using English words and expressions. *"Because I know how to translate and I get many new words, I felt more confident to speak with others" (Interview with PAR).*

E. Discussion

This study found that the students were very attached to smartphone. They love technology and cannot be separated from it. In learning English, the students prefer technological tools rather than printed learning materials or references. Prensky (2001) decribed this character to represent the first generation of the Digital Natives whose life were spent more interacting with mobile technologies rather than for reading book. It was not to say that the digital learners are not good learners but they have different learning styles from the older generation.

The students were found to be motivated to learn English. Some of the students were intrisically motivated (they like English very much) and some other were extrinsically motivated (they recognized the advantages of mastering English) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, being in English foreign language learning (EFL) context, formal English language learning at colleges is very limited. Hence, the students were putting own effort to

learn on their own by utilizing the available resources within their reach. In this regards, the students initiated to learn English informally without teacher supervision by making use of smartphone affordances.

In numerous studies, the current emerging mobile technologies have been indicated potential to support foreign language learning not only in a formal setting that is designed and organized by teachers or instructors (Thorton & Houser, 2005; Vogel, et.al., 2007; Kukulsma-Hulme & Shield, 2007) but it also possibly takes place in an informal setting initiated by the learners outside educational institution without being monitored by a teacher or instructor nor being graded (Bahrani & Sim, 2012; Steel, 2012; Chen, 2013; Jones, 2015).

In the present study, the students have started using various android applications to support their English language learning on their own initiative. The main app used was dictionary app to search for meaning. Vocabulary was thought very essential to be able to understand and comprehend English expressions. The rationale for this finding may be explained by linking it to several differences of learning English in EFL and ESL context. While in ESL context the learners possibly have many opportunities to be exposed to English outside the classroom and the goal of learning English generally aims at being literate in English, in EFL context with less opportunities to be exposed and to practice English, the main goal of learning English is generally intended for two purposes; 1) for educational or profesional needs of passing English exam to pursue higher education or fulfilling work requirements and 2) to acquire basic ability to communicate globally (Gebhard, 2009). In this case, it was not suprising that the apps utilized by the students were limited mostly to dictionary rather than more specific and complete English language learning apps. It was because the students wanted to at least understand English expressions they encountered daily rather than to communicate in English fluently.

Another important highlight that can be derived from the study is that the students still have limited knowledge about the available emerging technologies that are potential to support their English language

learning. Despite various English language learning apps available for free for android (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017), it was only the students who was highly fond of English that appeared to actively search for alternative to learn English on their own while others were following their friends footsteps.

In addition, the students also reported to have negative response from the teacher for their use of app in the class which was perceived by the teacher to be ineffective for their English language learning. Students and teachers different perceptions concerning the utilization of technologies to support learning had been captured in some literature. While the students were often enthusiastic, the teacher were worried about loosing the real learning and being replaced by technology (Li, 2007). This negative perception, in a part, was also because the teachers were digital immigrant who are not used to utilizing sophisticated affordances of the emerging technologies (Prensky, 2001).

Regardless of the dissonance perception between teachers and students, effective use of technological affordances was believed to remain within the teacher hands (Chun, et.al., 2016). Technology cannot replace teacher. As well, teachers' role as facilitator was found very critical to create a pedagogically comprehensive language learning environment embracing important principles of language learning (Stepp-Greany, 2002).

Despite still being limited in using the apps to support their English language learning, the students in this study highly valued the practicality and flexibility of smartphone technology. It was regarded very helpful and benefitting as they could learn English outside the class not only when they were doing homework or assignment but also when they were on leisure time listening to songs, playing games, and interacting on social media. This finding resonates with the previous study in which Steel (2012) contended that the rich contents and features of smartphone fitted students busy life. They could profitably use their time during the break, in-between classes, or in the bus commuting from home to campuses or workplaces to get exposed to the target language in various way.

F. Conclusion

This study has contributed to understanding how non-English major students used android applications to support English language learning within the limited resources of EFL context. It was revealed that the students had started to make use of the available free android apps to support their English language learning although it was still in a traditional mode and less explored.

The investigation in the recent study had answered the three questioned raised in the beginning. It was found that there were two categories of apps used by the students, those that were specifically related to English learning and those that were not directly related to English learning. Of all the apps, dictionary was the most popular among the students. Their main motive in using the apps was because they felt to have poor English and was eager to improve it. The practicality and flexibility nature of the apps were found effective to support them to learn English. These were also considered as the benefits because the students reported that they can be exposed to English easily and become more confident with their English.

As a generation who is born with mobile technologies on the surrounding, we are convinced that students preference on embracing mobile applications in learning is inevitable. Leaving students with sophisticated affordances of mobile technologies without guidance and feedback will be unwise. The teachers and students should be on the same continuum making the best use of the available resources of mobile applications for more effective English language learning.

We acknowledge that the current study was limited in a number of ways. It did not investigate further in detail how the use of particular apps affects the development of specific English skills. Neither did it measure to what extent the apps influence the progress. More studies are needed to have more insights on students personal use of mobile apps to support their individual and informal language learning outside classroom environment. The focus of study should be put on the pattern of using particular apps, the language areas targetted, and the influence on students English language development.

Additionally, it is also important to investigate teachers' perception and acceptance of students own use of mobile apps either in the class or outside the class to see more opportunities of linking classroom and outside classroom learning and to provide more effective students' informal use of available English learning apps. Teachers need to be welcomed to the fact that students are increasingly aware of more access they have to English language resources and references that are valuable to develop their English language skills.

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