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Exploring Learner Perception, Experience and Motivation of Using a Mobile App in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the widespread growth of mobile-assisted language learning using apps has made English vocabulary learning increasingly accessible. This study investigated students' perceptions of a vocabulary learning app developed by the researcher as a tool to help them to improve their L2 receptive vocabulary. The app, containing 20 levels, works with both iOS and Android. The participants were 14 undergraduate students at an English-medium university in Hong Kong. A qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews captured a holistic overview and revealed students' perceptions of the app. The results suggested that Hong Kong university students have a strong motivation for acquiring an L2 vocabulary. Participants also indicated a preference for mobile applications using gamified features. The study highlights directions for future research into apps for English language learning.

KEYWORDS

Acquisition, Alphabet vs. Aliens @PolyU, Learning, Mobile App, Vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Today, nearly all language teachers and learners use digital technologies (Healey, 2018), providing exciting opportunities for effective, authentic language teaching which can motivate students (Kessler, 2018). These opportunities include rich, real-time and convenient mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), particularly through mobile applications (apps) that allow study anytime and anywhere (Duman et al., 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2017). However, there have been few recent studies into the success of MALL for L2 development (Burston, 2015; Shadiev et al., 2017).

Vocabulary learning is a major challenge when learning a second language, and it is the most frequently explored skill in current MALL studies (Burston, 2015). Mobile technologies can aid learners in learning a large number of vocabulary (I.S.P. Nation, 2001). Specifically, mobile learning allows L2 learners to learn in small bites (Sung et al., 2016) at their own pace, and to adjust the difficulty to match their proficiency (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Consequently, educators need to incorporate MALL into language teaching and learning (Burston, 2015). It is therefore vital to evaluate the design and perceptions of such technology for L2 learning. This study explores students' perceptions of one language learning app: *Alphabet vs Aliens @PolyU*.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

In Hong Kong and beyond, there are increasing calls to incorporate independent learning using online platforms in teaching (Kessler, 2018). Apps have created many new avenues for students to develop their English proficiency (Chen et al., 2017). Chinese students want to utilise mobile technologies to develop their English competency (Zou & Yan, 2014). Thus, educators are naturally considering how to incorporate MALL in teaching (Wong et al., 2015). Apps now play a significant role in the effectiveness of language learning and classroom instruction (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018; Vurdien, 2017). However, the design of the apps and their use inside and outside the classroom may be quite different. MALL fosters independence and ubiquitous learning in informal settings (Burston, 2015), but there are still few studies of how L2 learners use apps outside the classroom (Stockwell & Liu, 2015). Mason and Zhang (2017) revealed that 94% of their Chinese participants used apps independently and recognised their importance for L2, but that learners only used a few of the features available. Thus, it is important to determine the features learners prefer and to tailor the app design appropriately.

Vocabulary acquisition is a focus of many studies, as it is essential to language acquisition (Duman et al., 2015), and recently, several vocabulary-learning apps have emerged (Chen et al., 2019). Effective vocabulary learning requires instruction that is versatile and systematic enough to encourage positive uptake (Nation, 2008). Moreover, teaching L2 vocabulary using MALL can improve learners' motivation (Zou et al., 2018). Educational technologists are therefore focusing on vocabulary app development (Godwin-Jones, 2017) and the ways apps can facilitate vocabulary uptake (Burston, 2015; Duman et al., 2015). This is particularly important in settings where learners cannot easily practice the target language, and thus they struggle to retain the vocabulary (I.S.P. Nation, 2001). Since there is no single way of becoming proficient in or learning a language, developers need to consider the needs of target learners, as some might prefer drilling and/or communicative practices, whereas others only want to learn vocabulary. Moreover, certain app activities are easier than others to design, such as vocabulary recall and grammar drilling (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Kim and Kwon (2012) established that most apps focus on recall and comprehension, and few involve collaborative learning. Reinders and Pegrum (2016) argued that educators should consider both L2 acquisition and pedagogy when evaluating apps. Consequently, it is vital to keep the intended target users in mind while developing activities.

However, pedagogical and technical qualities may be mismatched in apps (Pareja-Lora et al., 2013), and some apps simply replicate what is already available (Burston, 2015). Despite this, students tend to use apps for learning, and apps can certainly provide a foundation for acquisition and regular input, becoming a potential motivator (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

Some L2 learners may be reluctant to use apps as learning tools because they normally use their mobile phones for personal and social purposes only (Wong et al., 2015). Other problems include difficulty in concentrating when mobile, and inadequate numbers of sample sentences for each target word (Lu, 2008). App writers must address these issues to overcome students' reluctance to use their mobile phones for language learning.

Song and Fox (2008) established that students at a Hong Kong university were motivated to acquire English vocabulary incidentally, collaboratively, and deliberatively. Ma (2017) found that most L2 students actively build vocabulary, mainly outside the classroom. However, few studies, if any, have investigated Hong Kong students' perceptions of an in-house app specifically for this context. Understanding L2 students' perceptions of a vocabulary app is essential, as technology is indispensable in higher education.

Accordingly, this study explored students' perceptions of a new vocabulary app for L2 development. There were two research questions:

RQ1. What are students' attitudes towards using mobile apps, such as the *Alphabet vs Aliens @PolyU* app, for vocabulary learning?

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