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## **Exploring the Perceptions of EFL Learners towards Mobile-assisted Vocabulary Acquisition**

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**Abstract**--This research examined how high school students felt about using the Busuu app to learn new vocabulary. The study used a qualitative research approach to elicit in-depth opinions on the subject. In addition, it assessed the benefits and challenges experienced by the participants when using Busuu, a language learning application, to acquire English language vocabulary. With 25 high school students from a public high school in the Saudi Arabian educational district of Ar Rass, a semi-structured interview (questions asked in Arabic) was conducted. The collected data were coded, conceptually examined, and documented. The findings indicated that students have a positive attitude about utilizing the Busuu a language learning mobile application to aid in their vocabulary acquisition. The majority of users had a positive view of Busuu when it came to expanding their vocabularies. Additionally, it revealed that the Busuu helps students become more motivated, have fun, and expand their vocabulary. Finally, the study highlighted various technical or legal challenges that stop students from using mobile applications, which are summed up in the challenge of getting an internet connection or the prohibition of using mobile at school. According to the research, teachers should use the existing apps to help students learn English more effectively.

**Keywords**--EFL context, English language learning, English language teaching, mobile applications, vocabulary acquisition.

### **Introduction**

The relevance of increasing one's vocabulary to the process of learning a language has long been established, although, over time, opinions on its primacy have evolved and changed. It has long been believed that expanding one's vocabulary is essential. The emergence of widespread use of mobile phones among a significant

percentage of the population has been one relatively recent shift in this context. Several applications have been built specifically for language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Huang et al., 2012). Because of its portability, personal learning can occur anywhere. Both the Android and Apple device app stores offer a wide range of third-party applications (both free and paid). These applications include dictionaries, flashcards, and language lessons, all of which are intended to expedite the acquisition of new linguistic skills. Learning then takes place both inside and outside of the classroom, not simply during school hours but also in students' leisure time (Alnajjar & Brick, 2017).

MALL (mobile assisted language learning) has been shown to positively affect the acquisition of second/foreign language skills, particularly vocabulary, according to several studies (Agca & zdemir, 2013; Alshabeb & Almaqrn, 2018; Basoglu & Akdemir, 2010; Liu et al., 2014; Seliaman & Al-Turki, 2012). The argument has also been made that traditional educational approaches may not be beneficial for today's students, which might cause a significant imbalance between classroom instruction and the students' actual learning experiences (Alshabeb & Almaqrn, 2018; AlAjmi et al., 2021; Yassin et al., 2021). Additionally, it is asserted that the MALL approaches would incorporate the use of the internet and digital technology like tablets and mobile phones, which can increase student participation (Shava et al., 2016). As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, the educational systems of the world have transformed in the current time. The majority of countries have created technology-based distance learning programs for their students. The choice of online educational materials intended for students and teachers were motivated by the fact that students are learning remotely at home (Reimers et al., 2020). This type of instruction enables students with low reading levels and those who struggle with learning to use online methods to access information.

The range of online educational tools available to students has been strongly influenced by the fact that students are learning independently at home. Due to the availability of several language learning applications like Busuu, Babbel, Cambly, Quizzlet, Memrise, etc., EFL students today have the choice of studying the language individually and in a method that best suits them (Nushi & Jenabzadeh, 2016). Therefore, how students see such online apps is one of the intriguing topics about the usage of educational resources. Additionally, how can they exploit these resources, and which do they favor? The goal of this study is to learn more about Saudi English language learners' preferences and beliefs regarding the use of various language-learning applications. In order to combine self-managed language learning with a supportive social network comprised of language learners from all over the world, Busuu a smartphone application was created (Shibata, 2020). There are 20 languages supported by the app, including English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic. Overall, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is regarded as one of the Middle Eastern nations with a considerable prevalence of the internet and mobile phone users. This is because the vast majority of Saudis have internet service. Only a limited amount of research, meanwhile, has been made available to the public, highlighting the factors that encourage students to use a particular mobile language app. This is especially true when considering Saudi Arabia into account (Seliaman & Al-Turki, 2012). In spite of this, the Saudi government has been funding eLearning initiatives in the country's institutions, colleges, and schools. The Saudi

government is trying to improve the use of technology in educational settings as part of its endeavor to accomplish the objectives specified in the Saudi Vision for the year 2030. (Rajab, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

- What are the perceptions of Saudi high school students about using mobile apps for vocabulary acquisition?
- What benefits do Saudi high school students experience from utilizing mobile applications for vocabulary learning?
- What challenges did Saudi high school students have while using mobile applications to acquire vocabulary?

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Importance of Vocabulary Acquisition**

An extensive vocabulary is a prerequisite for reading, writing, and effective communication in any language. As a result, increasing one's vocabulary is one of the most essential aspects of learning the English language, and teachers should pay particular attention to the best techniques to teach vocabulary to learners (Ketola, 2019). Students with little vocabulary will have limited comprehension in terms of speaking, reading, listening, and writing. It might be argued that learning a new language without first being fluent in its vocabulary may be difficult (Baharuddin, 2018). Despite the words, this is valid. The improvement of one's vocabulary is one of the most fundamental elements of language education, according to zkiraz (2015) and Ouazeta (2016). There is no way to argue that teaching grammar will be effective without a strong vocabulary to support it (Fowle, 2002). Building a vocabulary is an essential component of learning a language. This becomes especially clearer when one takes into account the demands of tertiary students in this context (Deris et al., 2019). These learners are university students; thus, they frequently need to use academic language (Deris et al., 2019). This significantly raises the bar for vocabulary acquisition, especially for English language learners (Ebadi & Bashiri, 2018).

#### **Benefits of Mobile Application in Vocabulary Acquisition**

Compared to more existing techniques, mobile applications have been demonstrated to provide a number of benefits to anyone looking to increase their vocabulary in a foreign language (Klimova & Polakova, 2020). The simplicity of use that these applications offer is one of the benefits that stand out the most (Deris et al., 2019). These apps demand very little processing power and may be used on almost any mobile device (Ghobadi & Taki, 2018). One major benefit of these applications is that their intended audience of language learners nearly always seems to have access to the devices. Some claim that the usage of mobile applications may eventually totally dominate or perhaps supersede the use of the traditional textbook (Ali & Ghazali, 2016). Since they cannot be readily fixed or updated, textbooks are criticized for being particularly difficult for students to take around. The amazing pace at which new vocabulary-learning applications are being created has itself been cited as evidence of the value of such an

approach (Nami, 2020). Twenty years ago, there were hardly any such apps in the market, but today's students have a wide range of options at their disposal (Deris et al., 2019).

Thanks to recent technological advancements, many of the problems that were thought to have prevented mobile phones from being truly effective tools for the delivery of educational content - such as their relatively small screen size, short battery life, and the challenge of accessing larger files wirelessly - have been resolved (Wang, 2020; Ghobadi & Taki, 2018). Such applications might achieve outstanding input from professional users would have been at best, but the expansion of 4G coverage in particular has been a major factor in turning it into something that is now nearly expected of premium vocabulary building apps (Nami, 2020). Additionally, even though battery improvements have decelerated during that time, they have nevertheless contributed to improving the functionality of such apps. Whereas in the past users might have questioned whether using these apps would interfere with their ability to use their phones for their primary purpose, that has over time almost vanished as a result of technological advancements (Wang, 2020).

Men, women, and all other genders demonstrate equal benefits from utilizing these mobile vocabulary apps, as did learners at a low level of proficiency and those who are almost fluent level. This is an interesting finding considering that the effects do not appear to be related to either gender or overall English language proficiency (Ebadi & Bashiri, 2018). While the majority of the research in this area to date has concentrated on the effects that these vocabulary building apps can have on English language learners who are relatively inexperienced, their improvements are at least comparable when learners at the intermediate or advanced level are taken into account (Deris et al., 2019). Even while some have seen disparities in how men and women utilised these applications, no research has found a major gender disparity in accomplishment (Nami, 2020).

### **Gamification**

The nearly inherent tediousness of acquiring new vocabulary is one of the most noticeable disadvantages associated with this activity (Ghobadi & Taki, 2018). Since the beginning of the last fifty years, one of the most important goals of language instructors has been to assist students in moving beyond this obstacle, and as a direct result, to make the process of acquiring new vocabulary words as enjoyable as is reasonably possible (Ali & Ghazali, 2016). Despite this, such efforts are always constrained by the relatively short amount of time given for classroom activities, which they cannot avoid. After all, even a highly engaging class activity tends to be perceived as less fascinating when a student is required to do it independently as homework (Ghobadi & Taki, 2018). Despite this, the field continues to place a premium on efforts to gamify language-learning activities, particularly those aimed at expanding students' vocabularies (Deris et al., 2019). The growth of mobile apps that offer such activities has been a huge benefit since it allows class time to be utilized for other purposes (Wang, 2020). However, this does not mean that any gamified language activity will work. To be effective, these apps must be designed according to a coherent curriculum (Ali & Ghazali, 2016). Additionally, they must be engaging in addition to presenting the

terminology in a setting that encourages memory formation. It would be impossible to regard an app as anything other than a misuse of a user's time and effort if it lacks such context (Ebadi & Bashiri, 2018). As a result, the layout effectively distinguishes between valuable apps and less helpful ones (Wang, 2020). This worry gave rise to the notion of concentrating on the Busuu app for this study.

### **Busuu a Language Learning App**

An app called Busuu was created in 2008 with the goal of assisting language learners in all areas, not only vocabulary study (Kétyi, 2016). Although it has material in several different languages, only the section of the program meant for English language learners is pertinent to this study (Kétyi, 2016). Busuu, like many other applications, is designed to be used in short bites; according to its advertising, fluency may be achieved in just 10 minutes a day (Vesselinov & Grego, 2016). This is absurd, but it illustrates how the program's designers intended for it to be used in real life. The introduction of a word or phrase in its sociologically suitable context forms the basic framework of a lesson (Kétyi, 2016). There are then a variety of games and exercises that include questions distributed throughout the process, including puzzles, tests, flashcards, matching words to pictures, performing cloze tasks, and so on (Vesselinov & Grego, 2016). The user can advance to the following section of the lesson plan only when they have correctly answered each of these questions. Only the app's premium users have the opportunity to get comments from native speakers of the language they are learning (Kétyi, 2016).

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

Qualitative studies provide researchers more freedom to investigate phenomena beyond the constraints of the Likert scale (Arifin, 2018; Peterson, 2019). The only method for gathering information from the participants in the current study was the interview. This is due to the fact that it may enhance the student's actual practice in a way that mathematical techniques cannot, namely by adding clarity and depth. Furthermore, there is a worry that intermediate school students might not complete the questionnaire honestly.

### **Participants**

A public high school in Saudi Arabia's Ar Rass educational district was chosen to participate in the study, and 25 juniors and seniors from the school were chosen. Ages 14 to 17 years old, they all attended high school together for their freshman year. Since their levels of verbal competence are practically the same, they are comparable.

### **Interview**

A semi-structured interview combines both more formal and less structured interviewing techniques (Newcomer, 2015). The interviewees may be able to fill in

any gaps by using this process that the interviewer himself may not have considered (Doody & Noonan, 2013). It is crucial to remember that the research's objective was to reflect the respondents' experiences rather than to direct the conversations in a certain direction (Doody & Noonan, 2013). As a result, when the interviewer did suggest his follow-up questions, he did so just to make sure that the participant's complete meaning was recorded (Newcomer, 2015). During this method, the following themes were discovered:

- The ease of use – or lack thereof – that this app offered.
- Physical difficulties related to the use of the app.
- Technological challenges related to how students interface with this app.
- Improvements in the participants' levels of confidence in spoken English.
- Specific features of the app that participants found helpful in vocabulary acquisition.
- Financial considerations – the need to pay for premium versions of the app.

### **Research Ethics**

Indeed, there are several significant ethical issues that apply to qualitative investigations like the one in question. The confidentiality of interviewees is guaranteed by abiding by relevant ethical rules (Arfin, 2018; Orb et al., 2001). Making sure that informed permission was obtained before the interview process began was one significant ethical principle that this study considered. When we refer to informed consent, we mean that the interview subjects were made aware of any potential harm that may arise from taking part in this study. Furthermore, it was essential to refrain from asking learners to read a difficult paper printed in English because this would not be considered informed consent as they would not be able to comprehend such a document (Arfin, 2018). Instead, the papers that were handed to them were written in Arabic and were prepared in a straightforward manner.

This study upheld the ethical premise of voluntary involvement, which is also a major ethical principle. This implies that if an interviewee decides they want to stop taking part, they can do so at any moment (Orb et al., 2001). Finally, the participants' identities were kept anonymous and confidential. Additionally, the information gathered for this study was securely saved and discarded soon after it had been thoroughly compiled (Orb et al., 2001). That means that for the sake of this study, all information that may be used to link an individual respondent's interview replies was erased soon after the information had been thoroughly compiled. This also implies that the interviewer won't discuss any information about people in professional or informal contexts (Arfin, 2018)

### **Data Analysis**

The method of phenomenological analysis was used to compile and to further examine the data obtained from these interviews (Giorgi, 2006). This entails searching for recurring themes in the interviewees' responses (Groenewald, 2004). The interview was recorded using a mobile device and was done in Arabic. The main goal of the interview was to collect feedback from the participants on their experiences using Busuu app and any difficulties they encountered across. The

information was then translated, encoded, and converted into themes in the following stage. Then, these themes are given the appropriate consideration to identify which may be regarded to reflect the overall perceptions and attitudes of individuals who participated in the interviews (Giorgi, 2006). A student's number was added to each quotation after some of the students' comments were cited.

## **Results and Discussion**

*RQ1: What are the perceptions of Saudi high school students about using mobile apps for vocabulary acquisition?*

Findings indicated that the students' perceptions of using the Busuu app to acquire vocabulary are favorable. Some responses included "It was quite easy to use."; "the app is useful"; "Busuu helps me a lot"; "I enjoyed learning the words using Busuu", and "the app teach me new words". The Bussu app, according to the students who participated in the interview, included a variety of helpful features that helped them acquire language. The pronunciation practice tool in the vocabulary training function can help you learn new vocabulary. Student 19 said, "Busuu encourages me to practise pronouncing unfamiliar words". Student 7 shared the same idea and commented by saying, "It motivates me to work on my pronunciation of the new words," Also, Student 12 was very positive about the use of the app and said that Busuu "helps me pronounce unfamiliar words." The opportunity to record their voices was brought up in relation to how the students perceived using Busuu. This feature has been cited by several students as one of the primary reasons they use the Busuu App so regularly, for instance, Student 17 reported, "it is fun that you can record your voice.". Similarly, Student 3 stated that the recoding function improved their utterance of the words. He stated, "I improved my pronunciation after using the app several times." A related comment was from Student 8 who said, "I record myself and listen to my pronunciation. I can repeat this many times". This finding agrees with the finding of previous studies such as (Sorentino & Spano, 2019) who proved that using the application has helped non-native English students improve their English skills, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

*RQ2: What benefits do Saudi high school students experience from using mobile applications for vocabulary learning?*

Students claimed that the application improved their command of vocabulary. Instances of these positive responses from Student 18 included the following: "Thanks to my use of Busuu, I found my vocabulary to have increased pretty dramatically in only a few weeks." In addition, Student 17 mentioned that "the application makes it easy for me to improve my level of vocabulary. I know more words now than before". Analyzing the learners' progress provided another encouraging perspective. The students expressed their appreciation for the app's feature of allowing them to track their improvement in their comments. Nearly everyone thought that they were better equipped for using it, even if none of them had yet felt like they had acquired confidence. As one participant said: "Knowing that I have covered dozens of sets in the last week makes me feel much better about my progress I really think I'm getting there!"

Another benefit was the motivation that Busuu gives to students. The majority of the students stated that the Busuu app changed their perception of vocabulary learning making it more active, interactive, and motivating. Student 5 mentioned that the app *“changed the way I was learning new words”*. Similarly, Student 23 said, *“I am now using the app every day because I feel it is increasing my vocabulary knowledge”*. Student 1 commented about how the app changed his desire to learn the vocabulary by saying, *“I am always motivated to add new words”*. *One of the respondents stated that he thought the application was a helpful addition to his English textbook since it gave him regular access to engaging opportunities to practise vocabulary and spelling.* Student 14 said, *“The app helped me practise vocabulary and spelling in a fun, interactive way, supplementing my English textbook.”* Student 25 also reported, *“I feel as though I am doing a great deal of work on this app, but I come back to the words I had just learned the day before, and they are completely gone from my mind.”* Another response offered to this question was from Student 9, *“My grades in my English classes seem to be going up, but I am not certain if that is the result of my use of Busuu specifically.”* Many students claimed that while using this application did not improve their scores in their EFL lessons, it did make them feel a little more comfortable speaking English in a conversation. This is comparable to the point made by (Ibitoye & Olaiifa 2018), who said that learners' determination to conquer the obstacles presented by each new level is what tickles their interest and keeps them motivated to keep using the applications. However, the majority of educational games place more emphasis on entertaining and educating students than on assessing how much their skills have improved as a result of playing the game repeatedly. This outcome is consistent with other research findings that acquiring vocabulary directly impacts a learner's success with a foreign language (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018; Wang, 2020).

*RQ3: What challenges did Saudi high school students have while using mobile applications to acquire vocabulary?*

Students made the point that because there isn't a consistent, free internet connection in the classroom, it's challenging for users to use the majority of the features and functions of the applications. The learners emphasized the need of having access to the internet in order to get the most out of the application. Student 10 stated, *“I don't have access to the internet in the school.”* Student 13 agreed that access to the internet is difficult in school. He added, *“we can have access to the internet only during the English classes”*. Student 6 clarified *“the teacher of English encouraged us to use the Busuu app and provided us with his internet data during his classroom, but when he finished the lesson we got disconnected”*. Thus, it can be claimed that students may not be able to use Busuu applications effectively if they don't have access to the internet. Another relevant issue was highlighted by Student 2 who confirmed, *“we are not allowed to have the mobiles inside the school all the time, so we are not able to use it during school time”*. Student 7 clarified that *“the app is good and it is useful, but we are using it during the English classes only. There is no time to use it outside the English language classes.”*

In summary, the data demonstrate that online tools and activities allow students the opportunity to engage in practical learning experiences. This research

concluded that parallel language acquisition still faces the same difficulties despite the current growth of social media and new technology. To determine the right support that students need, more research is necessary.

## **Conclusion**

The following illustrates the solutions found in relation to the three research questions addressed by this study. According to the data that was gathered, utilizing Busuu app to increase the vocabulary of EFL learners can make them more independent and provide them access to beneficial resources that let them learn the language at their convenience and discretion. Developing self-confidence and fluency is another important factor for EFL students. According to the study, students were enthralled by Busuu's gamification features and were able to learn new phrases far more quickly using Busuu than they would have otherwise. The findings also revealed that students intended to utilize the Busuu app as a practical and efficient learning tool throughout their academic careers. According to the study, Busuu makes language learning and language acquisition more interesting and enjoyable. In a nutshell, the study's findings indicated that language-learning applications would be more beneficial for EFL novices learning the English language. The study's findings also highlighted some of the challenges that students had while employing the Busuu app, including the need for internet connectivity and the inconveniences of a smaller screen. Another drawback is that, even though some functionalities are unrestricted in the free version of the app, users must purchase the Busuu app in order to access the full resources. The Busuu app's limitation in this situation is that users cannot download lessons or activities to use at a later time. Due to their propensity to constantly switch between applications on their mobile devices, some students may find the application to be a distraction. The results showed that as the trial went on, it got harder to determine how much their vocabulary had increased.

## **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies**

This study's very limited size and scope were its most significant limitations. Only a certain number of interviews could be conducted due to the researcher's time constraints and the amount of work he could complete at one time. With more interviewers on staff, a greater scope of research could be possible.

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**Appendix**  
**The semi-structured questions**

The previously chosen questions that this study made use of in these interviews are listed below:

- How would you describe your experience with the Busuu app?
- Did you find the Busuu app useful for your learning of vocabulary?
- Has your use of the Busuu app helped you to improve your level of English vocabulary? Why or why not?
- How often do you use the Busuu app?
- In what ways would you say this improvement in your level of English vocabulary through the use of the Busuu app could be shown?
- Is the app difficult or easy to be used by you?
- What are some of the downsides that you noticed regarding your use of the Busuu app?
- What are the negative things that you dislike about the Busuu app?
- What are the most liked features when using the Busuu app?
- Do you find the relative lack of direction provided by these apps to be a positive or negative aspect of using them to improve your English vocabulary?