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Exploiting Smartphones and Apps for Language Learning: A Case Study with The EFL Learners in a Bangladeshi University

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Abstract

Learning English Language with the aids of applications (apps) on smartphones is now quite on the vogue among the EFL learners at the tertiary level of Bangladesh. Smartphones and apps making institutions are always coming up with innovative language facilitating softwares with a view to providing the users cum learners with much easier and more sophisticated advantages. EFL learners especially at the university level of Bangladesh are making the best use of these technological amenities in and out of the classrooms. This article endeavors to manifest the outcomes of a study conducted on a number of EFL learners majority of who are found to be exploiting English language learning apps comprehensively. It attempts to present how these apps can be better effectuated for the greater benefit of the EFL learners. With regard to pedagogical interest, this study aims to offer a feasible language teaching approach to the EFL instructors as well.

Keywords: Smartphone; Applications (Apps); Language; EFL learners; Bangladesh

Introduction

Learning English has always been of greater importance to the learners in Bangladesh. Especially the tertiary level students engage themselves emphatically in achieving the four skills of English which is very imperative in ensuring better career and prospects of higher study abroad for them. Lately, the trend of learning English has gained momentum because of the widespread use of technological devices adorned with language facilitating applications and software. The university learners are making the best use of the smartphones which are beautified with charismatic characteristics that allow the users to enjoy myriad advantages mostly relating to learning English. The total number of cellphone users in Bangladesh reached 119.087 million in September-2016 (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, BTRC). Majority of this aggregating number consists of the smartphone users of which the lion's share is the university students who are very apt in applying technology in learning no matter wherever they are. The academicians have always been putting their utmost efforts to liberate learning from the constraints of time and place [1]. And, the liberation of learning from the constraints of time and place can be better facilitated mostly through 'Mobile Learning'. In this regard, Walsh, Shrestha and Hedges [2] present that mobile phones can be comprehensively applied and utilized in English Language Teaching and Learning in Bangladesh. In addition, Valk, Rashid and Elder [3] find that mobile learning holds a good number of advantages that can be exercised on the field of education. It assists education by dint of promoting substantial learning procedures and teaching approaches which are on the whole called 'New Learning'. In short, mobile learning is known as 'm learning' which signifies the facility that ensures provision of instructional materials as personal pocket devices such as PDAs, Smartphones and mobile phones. As a matter of fact, a great change in the way people learn English all over the world is always on the go with the direct help of mobile devices and apps [4]. Accordingly, this study intends to explore as well as demonstrate the prevalence of English language learning with the assistance of smartphone and application software among mainly the tertiary level students of Bangladesh. Furthermore, it concentrates on understanding how both the EFL teachers and learners of Bangladesh can exploit smartphones and apps for making language learning happen at its best.

Literature Review

Mobile applications (apps) are mainly the softwares which are developed to be used on smartphones and are abundantly provided through apps stores [5]. In fact, because of the burgeoning number of mobile phone users as well as the incredible number of smartphones at the hands of the users, there has been the presence and establishment of an enhanced number of software making industries which have taken Bangladesh by storm recently [5]. In addition, the mobile application softwares are not only performing wonders in communication phenomena but also bringing innovations in imparting education in different genres. Echoing this, Godwin-Jones [6] highlights that the availability of mobile apps facilitating learning has given birth to incredible curiosity among the academicians. He points out that especially the language educators have found a very faithful as well as feasible phenomenon to be effectuated in teaching and learning the target language. Moreover, Guo [7] in his research in British Council says as more and more mobile technologies along with revolutionary emergence of smartphones embellished with huge number of educational applications are being incorporated in learning, technology facilitated EFL and ESL are obviously on the rise. Guo [7] also presents that mobile apps have inspired remarkable scopes and advantages for individual and students-oriented atmospheres with relaxing entrance to learning in an ever-present manner. Hence, to implement language learning by dint of smartphones and devices, the users cum language learners need language-learning-facilitating apps which, Mindog [8] states, apps are popular technological tools possessing an immense potential to accelerate language learning. They are quite easily accessible being either free or mentionable cheap. As a matter of fact, mobile apps are to be utilized on smartphones which are comfortably portable and

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customizable and already belong to the learners [8]. In relation to this, Cano [9] says smartphones and other mobile digital devices can be amazingly potential educational resources. In a similar way, Wu [10] investigates the effectiveness of smartphones on assisting ESL learners on having command on vocabulary and finds that students learn vocabulary on smartphone apps like Word Builder, English Vocabulary, Word Learning, Word Power etc. more easily and smoothly than in a printed dictionary. Besides, apps relating to EFL and ESL are generally programmed with different sorts of interesting games, puzzles and tests that help the learners enjoy learning [11]. In this sense, British Council apps like Johny Grammar's, Word Challenge, Duolingo, two min English, Game to learn English powowbox, Real English etc. are the most effective and feasible apps that help learners learn English with fun [4].

Nevertheless, though there prevails considerable potentials and prospects of smartphones and apps to facilitate English language learning in Bangladesh, there has not been so far any palpable study on the use and application of mobile learning among the learners in the country, neither general nor EFL. But, a great number of university students particularly make use of smartphones and applications to learn as well as practice the four skills of English language in their day to day life, which this study solely aims to bring to front. Along with this, it aims at knowing how the students who benefit linguistically from the devices programmed with language easing software feel and understanding how the devices can be better actuated in the EFL classrooms in Bangladesh. This article also holds pedagogical motto which targets to pace technology-based English language teaching and learning among the teeming education sector of the country.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study basically focus on accelerating English language learning with the assistance of smartphones and apps. The following direct and indirect phenomena are emphasized to be the objectives of the study:

- To be familiar with the existing magnitude of smartphones and apps assisted English language learning among the Bangladeshi university level EFL learners.

- To encourage the exploitations of smartphones and apps in learning.

- To make the EFL facilitators in Bangladesh abreast of the feasibility of a sophisticated as well as pragmatic approach to pedagogy.

- To inspire the EFL learners to utilize smartphones and apps for the purpose of speeding up their language learning process.

- To come up with the ideas of how and what apps can be better manipulated for the purpose.

Advantages of learning through apps

On every skill and element of the target language, there are a great number of apps available in Google Play Store. One has to open the window and search whatever he wants to choose and install. Once installed, an app works in accordance with its internal arrangement to serve the purpose of the users. In the competitive world of technological accomplishments, different applications offer myriad sorts of user-friendly facilities. For instance, a vocabulary building app helps the learners learn the correct pronunciation of the words, spell them correctly, read the sentences made with them, do practice tests with them, see the score and have the techniques to remember them easily.

Like this, there prevail numerous apps with innumerable utilities that provide the learners with multitudinous options and alternatives to have a comprehensive access to the target language. With English language learning apps the EFL learners can enjoy the following advantages:

- Practice any item of the language anytime anywhere.

- The smartphones and the apps are portable.

- The Learners don't have to carry books, pen and paper.

- They can take tests on the different skills of the target language.

- They can share their proficiency with their friends through the same device.

- They can practice the four skills of the target language on the same device.

- On the apps, they can have lessons and tips on the different skills.

- They can have knowledge and fun together.

- They can be technologically advanced and linguistically benefited simultaneously.

- They can get the apps for free.

- Apps can accompany them 24/7 like an expert teacher on the target language.

After all, learning English Language with the help of smartphones and apps is indeed quite enjoyable, time saving and cost effective. It, in fact, can take place in a ubiquitous manner. It rewards the learners with an opportunity to practice and learn in walking, sitting and lying modes. So, this emerges to be an omnipresent learning system now-a-days for the EFL learners.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were incorporated to conduct the study. Initially, quantitative approach was utilized with a view to determining the number of participants who exploit and who do not exploit smartphones and apps for earning proficiency in the target language. This was done with the help of a carefully designed questionnaire. The researcher got hold of the required data on the varied number and percentage of students who support or do not support the proposed devices and software in the EFL classroom. Later, the participants were to perform reading and writing tests that provided the researcher with quantitative observations.

Participants

The total number of students participating in the study was 150 (male 85 and female 65). Five batches each having 30 students played an active role in the task. They were from five different departments (Business Administration, Law, CSE, Sociology and Pharmacy) of Dhaka International University and belonged to 3rd semester having already passed one year at the university. Their age was between 17-20 years. They were learning English as an essential part of a credit course named 'Functional English' which required them to go through a four-month long nurturing in English and a grading test at the end of the semester.

Instruments

With a view to conducting the research and collecting the data, two types of instruments were utilized. Firstly, a questionnaire containing
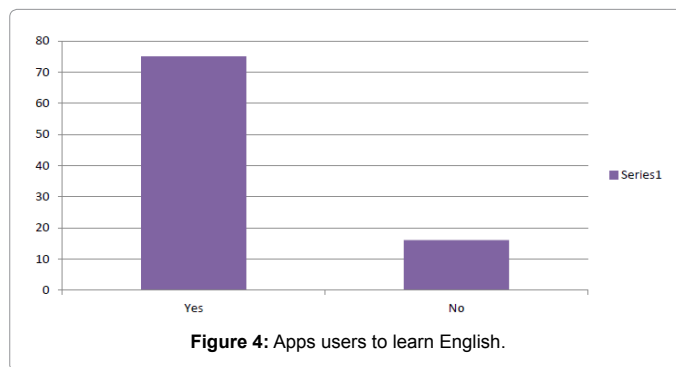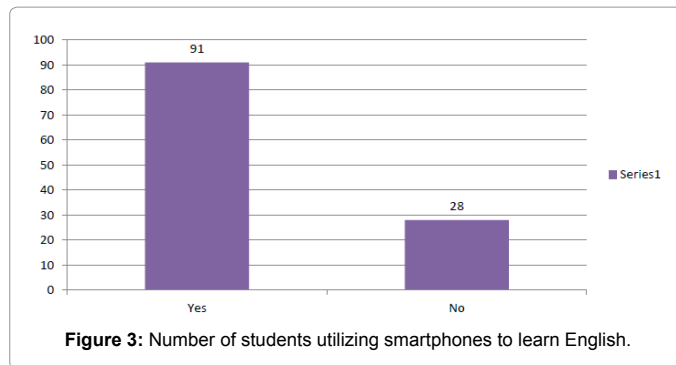
close ended questions was provided to the students as to if they possessed and used smartphones, whether they used those for learning English or not and if they utilized English language learning apps in their smartphones. All the questions could be answered in the yes, no and co comment options. Subsequently, the participants were given a task of vocabulary reading, pronouncing, guessing synonyms and sentence making. Both the learners with smartphones and apps and the learners without smartphones (or with smartphones but having no English language learning apps) and apps performed the task. Finally, observations and findings took place.

Data collection and procedure

The participants were divided into two groups on the ground of having smartphones and English language learning apps and not having smartphones (or having smartphones without English language learning apps) and English language learning apps. They were asked to sit separately in their respective group. Students with smartphones and the required apps were placed in one group which was termed Group-A. Participants without smartphones as well as with smartphones but using no English language learning apps were placed in Group-B. Eventually, these two groups had to go through a vocabulary learning and sentence making test that allowed them to make the best use of all sorts of language learning aids they possessed. The test revealed if mobile devices and the English learning mobile software are really meant to help the learners (Figures 1-4).

Findings: The participants answering 'Yes' in Figure 4 were to participate in the survey below (Tables 1-3).

Analysis: The study focuses on some fundamental questions on the learners' possession and utilization of smartphones and English language learning applications. The result of the survey indicates that EFL learners at university level in Bangladesh at the present era are trending on learning through mobile devices aided by various language facilitating applications. The participants exploiting smartphones

Figure 1: Number of the participants using mobile phone.

Figure 2: Number of students using different types of mobile phones.

Figure 3: Number of students utilizing smartphones to learn English.

Figure 4: Apps users to learn English.

| Yes	No	No Comment
65	07	03
86.66%	9.33%	4%

Table 1: If the participants find English language learning apps helpful to learn English much better and more easily.

Yes	No	No Comment
61	12	02
81.33%	16%	2.66%

Table 2: If the participants think English language learning apps can be manipulated in learning all the four skills of the language.

Yes	No	No Comment
59	14	02
78.66%	18.66%	2.66%

Table 3: If the participants think EFL teachers in Bangladesh should encourage the learners to utilize smartphones and English language learning apps in the classrooms.
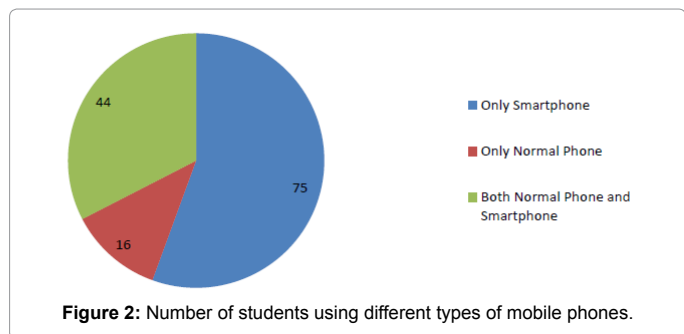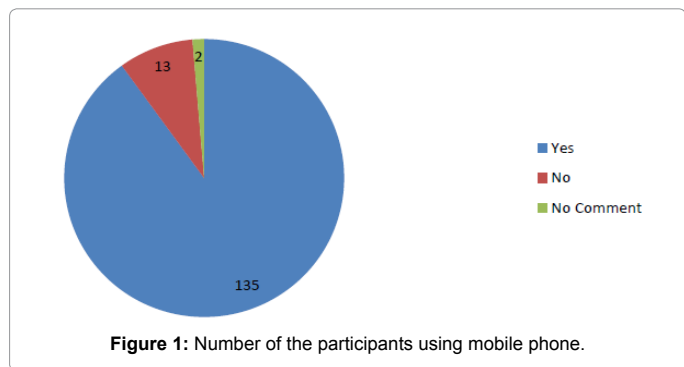
and the target language easing software appear to be more confident in regard to their dealing with deciphering as well as answering the questions. They emerge to be more active and composed in the subsequent vocabulary test given that they are fully in the disposal and use of the 'm learning' devices.

The findings demonstrate that the number of mobile phone users among the students at the tertiary level is quite high as 135 (90%) of the participants admitted possessing a mobile phone while only about 9% revealed to use none. Among the mobile phone users of the participants in this study, 50% use smartphones whereas more than 37% use both normal and smartphones, and around 11% utilize only normal mobile phone. There were total 119 smartphone users who respond to whether they use the devices to learn English or not, which 76.47% affirm and 23.52% negate. These 76.47% EFL learners using smartphones to learn

English asked if they use English language learning apps, which 82.41% admit while 17.58% answer in the negative.

Among the 75 apps users, 86.66% find learning English with the help of apps easier and better, whereas 9.33% do not think so, and 4% refrain from saying anything. 81.33% apps users think that English language learning apps can be exploited to assimilate and attain all the four skills of the target language, while 16% do not find them that way, and 2.66% simply do not pass any comment. As to if the EFL teachers should encourage the English language learners to utilize English language learning apps, 78.66% of the apps users respond affirmatively and 18.66% negatively, and the remaining 2.66% respond neither.

Vocabulary learning and sentence making test: In the last part of the questionnaire, 20 words (auspicious, crotchety, jettison, solicitous, flamboyant, wheedle, monochromatic, celestial, inexorable, cerebral, aggrandize, paradigm, accouter, fallacious, malodorous, malleable, raconteur bludgeon, intelligentsia and vivacious) were given. Each of the students was instructed to pronounce them, guess their meaning and synonyms and make meaningful sentence with each of the words. The participants were given time to study the words along with their pronunciation, meaning, synonyms and sentences. Subsequently, they were asked to come forward one at a time and submit their answer scripts as well as pronounce the words aloud before the teacher.

Results and Discussion

Observations

It was vividly observed that the lion's share of the participants employs smartphones and ELF and ESL apps. This goes on with the study of Julie Zilber [12] that suggests that Smartphone apps can act as a strong platform for modern day English language learners. In the vocabulary learning, pronouncing and sentence making test, the learners having an active access to smartphones embellished with English language learning apps performed in a much better magnitude. This supports the finding that Smartphone applications can be remarkably effective for mobile-assisted language learning [13]. Majority of the participants have found smartphones and apps to be quite easy and comfortable for learning the target language. A lot of them are on the side of the proposition that EFL teachers in Bangladesh be able to facilitate the learning process one step ahead if they entertain the learners' use of smartphones and apps in the classroom.

Limitations

Quite a number of limitations are obvious in this study. Most noteworthy is the fact that number of university the study covers is only one. A study with the students from several universities of Bangladesh could come up with more reliable scenario regarding the research area. The number of participants in the study was relatively small. The approach was applied on the students of five departments only. A better convincing result could be attained if the study were conducted comprehensively. The researcher had to teach and test each batch separately for they belong to different departments. If all the students could be interviewed and tested together, a consolidated observation could be attained. Besides, the researcher had to execute the study in a limited period for once the semester is over, he will find it difficult to keep in touch with the learners. Moreover, some students seemed not to understand the questions properly. The researcher had to clarify the things to many of them. Furthermore, some students seemed be reluctant to as well as uninterested in going for technological support in learning other than being obsessed in printed books. In addition to this, some students' mania towards other aspects of the Smartphone and its

numerous other apps was visible. However, it is verily possible that the participants would respond more thoughtfully and spontaneously if they were given more time to reflect.

Conclusion

The study was accomplished in Dhaka International University, Bangladesh. Its overall execution and findings reveal that EFL learners in the country can be better benefitted should cent-percent of them are willing and apt in availing themselves of Smartphone and its multifarious applications for learning English. Though a great number of tertiary level learners of Bangladesh are still lagging in regard to possessing technological educational apparatus and incorporating them in learning English, those with worth-mentioning liking and efficiency in mobile learning is going beyond. Concurrently, some EFL teachers are still on the side of following the traditional 'teacher is the boss' method of teaching which is why they keep aloof from resorting to and allowing technological exposure in the class. Notwithstanding, EFL teachers in Bangladesh are being trained more and more of the epoch-making changes in language pedagogy worldwide. They are found to be opening up to the change-oriented universe of teaching. Hopefully, there are going to be auspicious days when EFL teaching and learning in Bangladesh will be inclusively digitalized with mobile technology and welfare software.

Recommendations

In accordance with the results and observations of the study, some recommendations can be offered. As for the language facilitator in an EFL classroom, he /she has to be liberal to the learners' use of smartphones and English language learning apps. Internet facilities, like WIFI, broadband and other extended internet services have to be availably provided at the campus (both inside and outside the classrooms). Teachers are expected to know in advance what updated apps are on the net for much easier and smarter learning of the target language so that they can make the learners abreast of them. The learners have to be very amicably connected to one another by virtue of knowledge sharing as well as many social networking sites. They are expected to share their idea of any innovative and more rewarding English language learning apps to the whole batch as soon as possible. After all, once at the learners' disposal, the apps have to be made the best use of.

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