

Challenges and Drawbacks of Smartphone-Based Language Learning for Vietnamese EFL Learners in Higher Education Settings: Perspectives on Mobile Apps and Curriculum Design

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Abstract—This study explored the opinions of Vietnamese EFL learners on m-learning challenges and drawbacks in Vietnamese higher education settings. The study also investigated the uses of mobile apps and curriculum design for English language learning and their impacts on students' learning experiences. The author used an exploratory design which included a 12-question survey and semi-structured interviews with 185 EFL students from a public university in Vietnam. The results revealed that while smartphones were perceived as a convenient and useful tool for learning English, there were several shortcomings associated with their use. These negative factors were technical issues, distractions, lack of motivation, and difficulty in finding suitable English learning apps. The results also highlighted the importance of integrating mobile apps into the curriculum design, and university management should provide training for students and teachers on using mobile apps for learning English as one of the necessary handbooks. The findings of this study may be beneficial to EFL teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers in Vietnam and other similar contexts where mobile apps are becoming increasingly prevalent as a language learning tool.

Index Terms—mobile apps, language learning, learning autonomy, motivation, curriculum design

I. INTRODUCTION

Smartphones have become an indispensable part of our daily life, and their widespread use has also changed the field of education as well. Huzairin (2020) has pointed out that language learning is one area where the use of smartphones has gained increasing attention, particularly in higher education settings. However, using smartphones for language learning also involves challenges and drawbacks, especially in non-native English-speaking countries such as Vietnam. In recent years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has invested a large amount of funds in English language education, and smartphones have been introduced as a potential tool to enhance language learning (My et al., 2020). Little research has been conducted to investigate Vietnamese EFL learners' perspectives on using smartphones for language learning so far.

The primary goal of this study is to examine the impact of mobile app use and curriculum design on EFL students' language learning, and, from these, to give some guidelines for applying it in language education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are more and more studies focusing on the integration of smartphones in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, showing the great positive impact of smartphones on foreign language teaching and learning, especially with smartphone apps (Kukulkska-Hulme, 2009). In this section, the author focuses on discussing some of the key challenges and limitations of m-learning and their integration into curricula for Vietnamese EFL learners at the tertiary level.

Many previous studies have highlighted the potential applications of m-learning in language education (Huzairin et al., 2020; Liu, 2009). Two of those studies demonstrated that mobile devices could enhance language learning by providing a variety of personalized, flexible, and context-aware learning experiences (Burston, 2014; Kukulkska-Hulme, 2009). Mobile apps can also provide instant feedback, foster peer-to-peer collaboration, and facilitate access to authentic language resources (García Botero et al., 2022; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

While using smartphones for language learning has its benefits, it is not without its challenges and drawbacks. One area of concern is the effectiveness and quality of language learning apps currently available. According to experts such

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as Blake (2016) and Kabilan et al. (2023), many apps lack sound pedagogical principles and rely too much on gamification and entertainment. This does not align with evidence-based language learning strategies, as noted by Kirschner et al. (2006) and van den Branden (2006). The scarcity of apps that cater to the linguistic and cultural context of Vietnamese EFL learners has the potential to worsen this situation, as pointed out by Nguyen (2016).

When attempting to learn a foreign language through smartphones, many EFL learners face a new set of hurdles. One such obstacle is the danger of being distracted and experiencing limited cognitive engagement, as noted by Pham et al. (2022). This is due in part to the fact that learners, according to Chen and Huang (2018), can be easily distracted and may engage in non-learning related activities whilst using mobile devices, making it harder to maintain focus or stay motivated. Negative impacts on learning outcomes and language skills development have been mentioned in studies of this matter (Crompton & Burke, 2018).

As Crompton and Burke (2018) indicate, mobile learning may worsen the digital gap between EFL learners. This is because not all learners have the same level of access to mobile devices and internet connectivity. Particularly in Vietnam and in other developing nations, the cost of mobile data plans and smartphones may be too expensive for some language learners. Accordingly, their options for learning via smartphones can be curtailed. Integrating mobile learning into EFL courses when it comes to curriculum design comes with a variety of challenges. A prominent difficulty is the absence of support from institutions and resources. Many higher education establishments in Vietnam do not have the infrastructure or funding to support this form of learning (Linh & Vu, 2021). Furthermore, existing EFL programs in Vietnamese universities often rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches, making it difficult to effectively integrate mobile learning (Tra, 2020).

Another challenge is the lack of training and expertise among EFL teachers in the use of mobile devices and language learning apps (Chen & Hsu, 2020). Research shows that many teachers feel overwhelmed and overwhelmed by the complexities of mobile technology, which can negatively influence their ability to integrate it into their curriculum (Domingo & Garganté 2016). This issue is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where English teacher training programs often do not focus on technology integration (Vu & Ha, 2020). Furthermore, the rapid pace of technological change can make it difficult to keep up with new developments and keep mobile learning courses relevant (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). For example, the constant evolution of mobile applications and devices may render previously effective teaching strategies and resources obsolete, requiring constant adaptation and innovation by teachers and curriculum designers (Godwin-Jones, 2011).

Finally, research on the effectiveness of smartphone-based language learning is still limited, especially in the Vietnamese context (Linh & Vu, 2021; Vu & Ha, 2020). While some studies have reported positive outcomes such as increased motivation and engagement (Gu et al., 2022), the evidence base is still insufficient to make conclusive recommendations for best practices in designing and implementing mobile learning courses (Shadiev et al., 2020). The lack of empirical research makes it difficult for educators and curriculum designers to make informed decisions about integrating mobile learning into EFL curricula.

All in all, learning a language on a smartphone has the potential to improve EFL education, but there are some problems, especially for Vietnamese students in higher education. Some of the biggest problems are that mobile apps aren't great or useful, they can be distracting, and not everyone has equal access to technology. Adding mobile learning to EFL courses also means dealing with institutional barriers, teacher training needs and the pace at which technology is changing.

III. METHODS

To address the challenges and drawbacks of smartphone-based language learning for Vietnamese EFL learners in higher education settings, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, which allowed for the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach allowed the author to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives on the mobile application and course design.

A. Participants

This study involved 185 EFL learners from a public university in Vietnam. Participants take a variety of core courses at different levels of English, from beginner to advanced, based on their scores on standardized English language tests. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, with an average age of 20.5. Among the participants were 112 women (60.5%) and 73 men (39.5%). All participants have access to a smartphone and experience learning English using a mobile app.

B. Data Collection

Data collection was carried out using two instruments: surveys and semi-structured interviews. The survey aimed to gather quantitative data on participants' language learning experiences on smartphones, including frequency of app use, the types of apps they used, perceived effects of mobile apps, and the challenges of learning a language using mobile devices. The survey includes closed and open-ended questions to allow participants to provide additional insight and explain their answers (Dörnyei, 1998).

After the survey was completed, a targeted sample of 20 participants representing different English proficiency levels and different mobile learning experiences was invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure participants felt comfortable and expressive.

The interview protocol contained open-ended questions designed to learn more about participants' experiences of using mobile applications and curriculum design in EFL courses, as well as their perceptions of the challenges and shortcomings of smartphone-based language learning. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

C. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation to describe participants' experiences and perceptions of smartphone-based language learning (Iman, 2015). Open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method that identifies, analyzes and reports patterns or themes in data. The author uses induction, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than imposing pre-existing categories or theories. The analysis was carried out in several stages, including data ingestion, initial coding, topic identification, topic review, and topic definition.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in two parts: the results of the survey and the results of the semi-structured interviews. The survey results provide an overview of the participants' experiences and perceptions of smartphone-based language learning, while the interview findings offer deeper insights into the challenges and drawbacks they encountered in relation to mobile apps and curriculum design.

A. Survey Results

The survey results provide an overview of the participants' experiences and perceptions of smartphone-based language learning. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics on how often participants used mobile apps for language learning, the types of apps used, and their perceived effects. The results indicate that the mean frequency of app use per week was 4.2, with a standard deviation (SD) of 2.1. The mean number of apps used was 3.1 (SD = 1.4), and the mean perceived effectiveness was 3.6 (SD = 0.8), rated on a scale from 1 to 5.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MOBILE APP USE AND PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS (N = 185)

Measure	Mean	SD
Frequency of app use (per week)	4.2	2.1
Number of apps used	3.1	1.4
Perceived effectiveness (1-5)	3.6	0.8

The most commonly used language learning app among the participants was ELSA, followed by Duolingo, Memrise, Quizlet, Busuu, and AnkiDroid, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
MOST COMMONLY USED LANGUAGE LEARNING APPS (N = 185)

App Name	Frequency	Percentage
ELSA	123	66.5%
Duolingo	94	50.8%
Memrise	87	47.0%
Quizlet	67	36.2%
Busuu	53	28.6%
AnkiDroid	47	25.4%

When asked about the challenges of using mobile devices for language learning, participants reported various issues, as shown in Table 3. The most commonly reported challenge was distractions, with 74.1% of participants reporting it. Limited app quality and effectiveness were also a significant challenge, with 61.6% of participants reporting it. Other challenges reported included insufficient internet connectivity (38.4%) and difficulty integrating mobile learning with courses (36.8%).

TABLE 3
CHALLENGES OF SMARTPHONE-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING (N = 185)

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Distractions (e.g., social media)	137	74.1%
Limited app quality/effectiveness	114	61.6%
Insufficient internet connectivity	71	38.4%
Difficulty integrating with courses	68	36.8%

B. Interview Results

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three main themes related to the challenges and disadvantages of smartphone-based language learning for EFL learners in Vietnam: (1) limited quality and effectiveness of mobile apps, (2) distractions and reduced cognitive engagement, and (3) challenges integrating mobile learning into EFL courses.

C. Limited Quality and Effectiveness of Mobile Apps

Participants raised concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the mobile apps they use for language learning. Many reported that the apps were more focused on gamification and entertainment than evidence-based language learning strategies. One participant commented:

"I enjoy using Duolingo, but I feel like I'm just playing a game. It doesn't help me improve my speaking and listening skills as much as I would like" (P6).

Furthermore, participants reported that most apps were not specifically designed for Vietnamese learners, which made it challenging to find apps that catered to their linguistic and cultural needs.

D. Distractions and Reduced Cognitive Engagement

Most participants reported that using a smartphone to learn a language often resulted in distraction and decreased cognitive engagement. They mentioned that they often engaged in activities outside their duties, such as Student 12. Checking social media or playing games, which hindered their academic progress. One participant explained:

"When I use my smartphone to study English, I often get distracted by notifications from social media or other apps. It's difficult to stay focused" (P12).

E. Challenges in Integrating Mobile Learning Into the EFL Curriculum

Participants reported challenges integrating mobile learning into their EFL courses, citing a lack of support and guidance from their teachers and institutions. They expressed a need for more structured guidance on how to use mobile apps effectively in their courses, as well as a desire for better coordination between apps and courses.

"I wish our teachers would provide more guidance on how to use mobile apps in our English classes. Sometimes I feel like I'm just guessing what to do, and it doesn't really connect with what we're learning in class" (P17).

Moreover, participants mentioned that their teachers often lacked training and expertise in using mobile devices and apps for language learning, which made it challenging for them to provide effective support and guidance. One participant shared:

"Our teachers seem unsure about how to use mobile apps in our lessons. They rarely use them, and when they do, it's not very effective" (P3).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight several challenges and drawbacks of smartphone-based language learning for Vietnamese EFL learners in higher education settings. The limited quality and effectiveness of mobile apps, coupled with the scarcity of apps designed specifically for Vietnamese learners, emerged as a significant concern. These issues are consistent with previous literature (Kacetl & Klímová 2019; Nguyen, 2016).

Distractions and reduced cognitive engagement were also identified as key challenges, which aligns with the findings of previous research on the potential negative effects of smartphone use on learning outcomes (Gu et al., 2022). This suggests that educators should consider strategies to minimize distractions and promote focused learning when implementing smartphone-based language learning.

Finally, participants highlighted challenges in integrating mobile learning into EFL courses. This includes institutional support, teacher training, and lack of consistency between mobile his applications and courses. These results mirror previous studies that identified barriers to effective implementation of mobile learning in EFL environments (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Lai & Chang, 2021). To meet these challenges, institutions and educators must invest in teacher training, infrastructure, and curriculum design to support effective integration of mobile learning into EFL curricula.

Overall, this study provides Vietnamese EFL learners with valuable insight into the challenges and shortcomings of smartphone-based language learning and helps expand the literature on this subject. Further research is needed to explore possible solutions and best practices to address these challenges and maximize the benefits of mobile learning in the context of his EFL in Vietnam.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research suggests that educators, institutions, and curriculum designers should address the challenges and shortcomings of smartphone-based language learning to maximize potential benefits and improve language learning outcomes. This includes developing culturally and language-relevant applications, minimizing disruption, and investing in teacher training and institutional support. Institutions should ensure all students have access to mobile devices and reliable internet connections, align mobile learning with EFL curriculum, further research into effective strategies and best practices, and create more engaging, effective and inclusive learning environment. This will help Vietnamese EFL learners improve their language skills and create a more engaging, effective and inclusive learning environment.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the challenges and drawbacks of smartphone-based language learning for Vietnamese EFL learners in higher education settings, with a focus on their perspectives on mobile apps and curriculum design. A mixed methods approach, including surveys and semi-structured interviews, revealed several key challenges, including limited quality and effectiveness of the mobile app, distraction and reduced cognitive engagement, and the difficulties in integrating of mobile learning into the EFL curriculum.

To address these challenges and maximize the benefits of smartphone-based language learning, we offer some recommendations for educators, institutions, and curriculum designers. These include developing culturally and linguistically relevant apps, minimizing distractions, investing in teacher training and institutional support, aligning mobile learning with the EFL curriculum, and conducting further research on effective strategies and best practices in the Vietnamese EFL context.

Ultimately, by addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, educators and institutions can better support Vietnamese EFL learners in their pursuit of language proficiency, creating a more engaging, effective, and inclusive learning environment that harnesses the full potential of mobile technology. As the use of smartphones for language learning continues to grow and evolve, it is crucial to remain vigilant and responsive to the challenges and drawbacks that emerge, ensuring that this innovative approach to education truly benefits all learners and contributes to their success in the globalized world.

APPENDIX A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This appendix presents the survey questionnaire used to collect data on the participants' experiences and perceptions of smartphone-based language learning.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender:
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
2. Year of study:
 - First year
 - Second year
 - Third year
 - Fourth year or higher
3. Major: _____

Section 2: Smartphone-Based Language Learning Experiences

4. On average, how often do you use mobile apps for English language learning per week?
 - times
 - 2-3 times
 - 4-5 times
 - 6-7 times
 - 8 or more times
5. How many different language learning apps do you use regularly?
 - 1
 - 2-3
 - 4-5
 - 6 or more
6. Which language learning apps do you use most frequently? (Please list up to three)
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
7. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "not effective at all" and 5 is "extremely effective," how effective do you think using mobile apps is for improving your English language skills?

1 2 3 4 5

Section 3: Challenges and Drawbacks of Smartphone-Based Language Learning

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements related to the challenges and drawbacks of smartphone-based language learning (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree):

8. Using mobile apps for language learning often leads to distractions (e.g., social media, games, notifications)

1 2 3 4 5
9. The quality and effectiveness of language learning apps are limited.

1 2 3 4 5

- 10. It is difficult to integrate mobile learning into my English courses.
 1 2 3 4 5
- 11. Insufficient internet connectivity often hinders my use of mobile apps for language learning.
 1 2 3 4 5
- 12. Please describe any other challenges or drawbacks you have experienced with smartphone-based language learning:

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This appendix presents the semi-structured interview protocol used to collect in-depth qualitative data on the participants' experiences and perceptions of smartphone-based language learning. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses related to the challenges and drawbacks of mobile learning, as well as to explore participants' perspectives on mobile apps and curriculum design.

- 1. Can you tell me about your experiences using mobile apps for English language learning?

- 2. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using smartphones for language learning?

- 3. Can you describe any challenges or difficulties you have faced while using mobile apps for language learning?

- 4. How do you think the quality and effectiveness of mobile apps for language learning could be improved?

- 5. How well do you think mobile learning is integrated into your English courses? What challenges or barriers have you experienced in this regard?

- 6. What do you think teachers and institutions could do to better support the integration of mobile learning into the EFL curriculum?

- 7. Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for improving the use of smartphone-based language learning in higher education settings?

- 8. How do you manage distractions (e.g., social media, games, notifications) while using mobile apps for language learning? Can you suggest any strategies that might help other students minimize distractions?

- 9. What are your thoughts on the availability and effectiveness of mobile apps designed specifically for Vietnamese EFL learners? How do you think these apps could be improved to better meet your needs?

- 10. Can you share any examples of particularly positive or negative experiences you've had using mobile apps for language learning? What made these experiences stand out?

- 11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with smartphone-based language learning or any other related topic that we haven't discussed yet?

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