

The Attitudes of Saudi EFL Learners Toward Using English Language Learning Mobile Apps for Learning English

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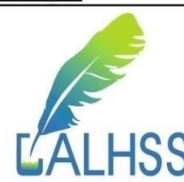
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the attitudes of Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students toward the use of Mobile English Language Learning Applications (MELLAs) as a tool for improving their language skills. A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 163 participants. The questionnaire included items rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1, very low) to “Strongly Agree” (5, very high). Statistical analysis of the mean Likert scale scores revealed that Saudi EFL learners generally expressed positive attitudes towards MELLAs. The findings highlighted several key reasons for this favorable perception, including the flexibility these apps offer, their user-friendly interfaces, and the convenience of accessing learning materials anytime and anywhere. Participants particularly appreciated the ability to tailor their learning pace and the availability of diverse resources within the apps. This study underscores the potential of mobile apps as effective supplementary tools for language acquisition, suggesting that integrating such technologies into traditional curricula could further enhance learning outcomes. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term impacts of MELLAs on language proficiency and to identify potential barriers to their optimal use.

Keywords: English language learning apps, EFL students, Saudi students, attitudes, effectiveness, interest.



Introduction

The rapid advancements in science and technology have opened up new horizons in the field of language learning, introducing innovative approaches such as mobile learning (m-learning) and computer-based learning. These developments have had a profound impact on education, with m-learning emerging as a particularly transformative tool. The growing accessibility of mobile devices—including smartphones, personal media players, and wireless laptops—has significantly enhanced the potential of m-learning for language acquisition (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006). In the context of English language education, m-learning has proven to be highly beneficial and effective, particularly for university-level teachers and learners. Substantial evidence suggests that m-learning positively influences students' English proficiency (Chinnery, 2006; Kang & Kim, 2007; Kim, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Salih, 2019).

M-learning offers numerous advantages, such as personalized learning experiences, access to an extensive range of free learning materials, opportunities for peer collaboration, support for authentic and context-based learning, and tools for self-assessment and problem identification. Research has consistently demonstrated positive student perceptions and attitudes toward m-learning (Alhalafawy, 2018; Chen, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2007; Nash, 2007; Sharples, 2000).

In recent years, the development of mobile applications specifically designed for English language learning has further revolutionized the field. Apps like Naver Dictionary, Yanadoo, and Papago have gained significant popularity among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. These apps offer diverse learning opportunities, ranging from vocabulary building and translation to reading English news, listening to broadcasts, and practicing pronunciation. Unlike traditional learning methods, mobile apps provide unparalleled convenience and accessibility, enabling learners to engage with learning materials anytime and anywhere. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of these apps in enhancing various aspects of English language proficiency (Hamad, 2017; Kim, 2013; Kim & Kwon, 2012; Suwantarathip & Orawiatnakul, 2015; Wang, Teng, & Chen, 2015).

While most existing research focuses on the development, effectiveness, and benefits of mobile apps for language learning (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017; Kim, 2013; Kim & Kwon, 2012; Klímová, 2018; Zou & Li, 2015), there remains a gap in understanding learners' attitudes toward English language learning apps. Additionally, much of the available research on learner attitudes centers on the use of social networking or messaging apps, such as Twitter, Facebook, and KakaoTalk, for English learning.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward the use of smartphone-based English language learning apps. This research is particularly relevant as Saudi Arabia continues to adopt digital tools to enhance



English language education, paralleling similar developments in other countries with comparable educational contexts. The study is guided by the following research question:

- What are Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward using smartphone-based English learning apps to learn English?

By focusing on this question, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the role of mobile apps in language education and provide insights for educators, app developers, and policymakers seeking to optimize their use in the EFL context.

Literature Review

- A Definition of M-learning

Mobile learning (m-learning) has been conceptualized in diverse ways by researchers, reflecting the evolving nature of mobile technologies and their applications in education. Broadly, m-learning lies at the intersection of mobile computing and electronic learning (e-learning), often referred to as e-learning facilitated through portable computational devices, including Palms, Windows CE machines, and cell phones (Quinn, 2000). It involves delivering educational content and training programs via wireless devices such as PDAs, palmtops, and smartphones (Keegan, 2002). Hoppe, Joiner, Milrad, and Sharples (2003) define m-learning as e-learning that leverages mobile devices and wireless transmission, emphasizing its ability to support learning beyond fixed locations. Similarly, O'Malley et al. (2003) describe m-learning as "any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies" (p. 7).

Traxler (2005) provides a more technology-centered definition, considering m-learning as "any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are handheld or palmtop devices" (p. 262). Keegan (2002) further narrows the scope, suggesting that m-learning should specifically involve learning activities conducted on mobile devices that can fit within a person's handbag or pocket. Caudill (2007) expands this perspective, describing m-learning as "any e-learning application delivered on-demand through mobile digital devices" (p. 3), emphasizing the ability of learners to access educational materials without restrictions of time, location, or traditional electronic technologies. Anani, Zhang, and Li (2008) highlight that m-learning represents an evolution of e-learning, enhancing mobility through advancements in media content and transmission technology.

However, some scholars argue that definitions of m-learning remain fluid and context-dependent. For instance, Kukulsa-Hulme (2009) points out that the term "mobile" can be ambiguous, encompassing both the physical mobility of devices and the conceptual mobility of learners. Traxler (2010) notes that earlier definitions of m-



learning were overly techno-centric, failing to account for the diversity and transient nature of mobile devices, systems, and platforms. El-Hussein and Cronje (2010) advocate for a broader interpretation, suggesting that mobility encompasses not only the physical characteristics of the devices but also the learning behaviors and processes of learners as they engage with mobile technologies.

This diversity in perspectives has made it challenging to establish a unified definition of m-learning or to conclusively identify its unique advantages. Baran (2014) argues that the breadth of research on m-learning reflects its versatility but also complicates efforts to pinpoint a singular definition or universally recognized benefits. Instead, m-learning is best understood as a dynamic and adaptable educational approach, shaped by technological advancements and the evolving needs of learners.

- **Advantages of M-learning in Language Learning**

Mobile devices are highly portable due to their compact size and lightweight design, allowing learners to engage with language learning activities beyond the confines of the classroom. This portability enables learners to carry mobile devices from one location to another with ease, facilitating access to educational resources and tools at their convenience (Alzahrani, 2021; Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2004). The accessibility of mobile devices empowers students to use their devices to study language in diverse settings and on their own schedules, enhancing their ability to tailor learning to personal needs (Chinnery, 2006).

One of the most significant advantages of m-learning is its ubiquity, which provides learners with opportunities to access learning materials and interact with teachers and peers without the constraints of time and place. This feature enables students to engage in language learning activities anytime and anywhere, fostering a more flexible and seamless learning experience (Fujimoto, 2012; Geddes, 2004; Miangah & Nezarat, 2012; Alhalafawy & Tawfiq, 2014; Alzahrani, 2018; Alhalafawy & Zaki, 2019; Alhalafawy & Zaki, 2022). By integrating m-learning tools, language education becomes more pervasive, creating an environment where students can study their second language whenever they choose, extending learning well beyond the traditional classroom setting (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012).

In technology-enhanced language learning contexts, m-learning environments can often be self-paced and accessible online, enabling learners to take control of their educational journeys (Chinnery, 2006). This self-directed approach supports learner autonomy, allowing individuals to customize their learning experiences to better suit their preferences and goals. Additionally, m-learning fosters collaboration among students, providing opportunities to work with peers on shared tasks and projects, which enhances the overall learning experience (Klopfer & Squire, 2008; Koole, 2009; Viberg & Grönlund, 2013; Najmi, Alhalafawy, & Zaki, 2023).



Another key benefit of m-learning is its ability to support personalized and authentic learning experiences. By leveraging mobile technologies, students can engage with tailored content and participate in contextually rich learning activities that align with their unique needs and real-world applications (Alhalafawy, Najmi, Zaki, & Alharthi, 2021; Traxler, 2010; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2007). Mobile devices offer learners access to diverse contexts and resources that are often unavailable in their immediate surroundings, enriching their understanding and facilitating learning in innovative ways (Naismith et al., 2004).

M-learning represents a powerful tool for language education, combining portability, ubiquity, collaboration, and personalization to create flexible, learner-centered environments. These advantages not only enhance the effectiveness of language acquisition but also align with the evolving demands of modern learners, ensuring that language education remains relevant and accessible in an increasingly mobile world.

- **Disadvantages of M-learning in Language Learning**

Despite its numerous advantages, m-learning in language education is not without its challenges. These issues can be broadly categorized into three domains: physical, pedagogical, and psycho-social (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

The physical limitations of mobile devices can hinder the language learning process. Features such as small screen sizes, limited keyboard functionality, insufficient storage capacity, and restricted battery life often pose difficulties for learners (Chinnery, 2006; Fouh, Breakiron, Farghally, & Shaffer, 2014; Miangah & Nezarat, 2012; Stockwell, 2008; Wang & Higgins, 2014). Additionally, extended periods of reading or interacting with text on mobile screens can cause eye strain and discomfort, further impacting the learning experience. These constraints may reduce the usability of mobile devices for complex language tasks, such as extensive reading or detailed writing exercises.

The pedagogical challenges associated with m-learning stem from the lack of structured oversight and assessment. Mobile learning often relies on students' self-motivation and responsibility for managing their learning progress. However, this autonomy can lead to uneven outcomes, as students may struggle to maintain discipline without regular guidance and supervision (Rovai, 2002). Furthermore, the informal nature of m-learning can make it difficult for educators to assess learners' achievements accurately, as traditional evaluation metrics may not align with the individualized and unstructured learning paths often facilitated by mobile devices.

Psycho-social factors can also influence the effectiveness of m-learning in language education. Many learners associate mobile devices with relaxation and entertainment rather than academic pursuits, which can lead to a lack of focus or seriousness in using these tools for learning purposes. The ubiquity of social media,



games, and other distractions available on mobile devices may further detract from learners' engagement with language learning activities. Additionally, some students may perceive mobile devices as less formal or credible compared to traditional educational tools, which could negatively affect their attitudes toward using them for language acquisition.

While m-learning provides significant opportunities for enhancing language learning, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed to optimize its effectiveness. Educators and developers must work to mitigate these limitations by designing mobile learning environments that are user-friendly, pedagogically sound, and capable of maintaining learners' focus and motivation. By addressing the physical, pedagogical, and psycho-social barriers, the full potential of m-learning in language education can be more effectively realized.

- **English Language Learning Apps in M-Learning**

Mobile applications offer a wide range of learning tools that can be conveniently installed on mobile devices, allowing learners to access educational content anytime and anywhere (Alzahrani, 2021). Jeong, Ko, Lim, Sim, and Kim (2010) identified various categories of educational apps, including self-instructional, repetitive practice, simulation, gaming, problem-solving, material-providing, assessment, and utility apps. For language learning, numerous apps have been developed to enhance various language skills such as listening, vocabulary acquisition, translation, reading comprehension, and speaking practice. These apps offer diverse functions like dictionary tools, language games, news updates in English, and apps designed to facilitate speaking and listening exercises.

Specifically, for English learning, mobile apps have become a popular tool for improving vocabulary and language proficiency. For example, Song and Fox (2008) found that using English learning apps on personal digital assistants (PDAs) significantly enhanced students' vocabulary skills in a self-directed manner. These dictionary apps allowed students to learn new words at their own pace, providing them with the flexibility to set and pursue their academic goals independently. Similarly, Kim (2013) investigated the impact of using Kakao, a popular messaging app, on students' English listening skills and found that learners made significant progress in their listening tests. Students also expressed positive attitudes toward using the app, appreciating its interactive nature and accessibility.

Moreover, research by Kim (2016) demonstrated that students of varying proficiency levels improved their speaking abilities through the use of Kakao and voice chatbot apps. These apps provided an engaging platform for students to practice speaking in a supportive, non-threatening environment, which contributed to their language development. Although there is limited research specifically focusing on learners' attitudes toward English learning apps, the existing studies consistently suggest that learners view these tools favorably. The ability to practice English in an



interactive, flexible manner helps reduce learners' anxiety and boosts their confidence in using the language.

English language learning apps have become an essential component of m-learning, offering learners the opportunity to engage with the language in diverse, personalized, and interactive ways. These apps not only enhance language proficiency but also support learners' motivation and confidence, making them an invaluable resource in modern language education. As the number and variety of apps continue to grow, they offer even more potential for language learners to practice and improve their skills on their own terms.

Methodology

- Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used to assess Saudi EFL student's attitudes toward using mobile apps in learning the English language in alignment with the study purpose table 1. The questionnaire items were set to answer the following research question:

- What are Saudi EFL learners' attitudes toward using smartphone English learning apps to learn English?

Table 1: Saudi EFL student's attitudes toward using mobile apps in learning the English language

Item No.	Statement
1	The use of e-learning in learning English has an impact on the environment less than the impact of paper books.
2	The advantages of e-learning applications are learning from anywhere and anytime.
3	E-learning for English is easy to use and attractive in design.
4	When I need help learning English, I can use educational electronic apps to find a specialist to help me.
5	The use of e-learning applications develops and helps to learn new English vocabulary.
6	The use of language learning applications develops and improves the language of the learner.
7	The use of English language learning applications increases educational interaction among learners.
8	One of the disadvantages of learning through electronic applications is that it is easy to switch to and engage in non-educational programs such as games, social networking sites and others.
9	One of the advantages of language learning applications is that it can be updated very quickly as technology evolves
10	Language learning applications are very useful for learners who have some hearing problems, such as



	deaf people and others
11	Language learning applications have a major role in the language learning process
12	Language learning applications are very useful for learners who have difficulties in movement such as balance or hyperactivity problems
13	Language learning applications are very useful for learners with speech difficulties, such as stuttering or difficulty speaking.
14	Using language learning applications for as long as possible is useful in learning the language
15	When I use language learning apps, I can review my conversation errors at any time.
16	When I use language learning applications, I can choose the skills I need to improve, whether speaking, reading or otherwise
17	Using language learning applications provides an opportunity to learn across multiple learning strategies
18	Language learning applications promote communication between parents and teachers from anywhere.
19	English learning applications increase self-confidence while practicing language learning
20	Language learning applications have developed my ability to converse with others.
21	Language learning applications have developed my listening skills.
22	Using language learning applications helped me achieve good grades in English.

- Data Collection

Social media is one of the most recent and commonly used approaches to collect study data due to its accessibility and convenience. Hence, a link to a survey prepared on Survey Monkey was sent to study participants through WhatsApp over three to four weeks.

- Data Analysis

Mean scores were used to evaluate participants' attitudes about their use of MELLA. A mean score of 1.00 to 1.80 represented "Strongly Disagree" (Very Low) while 1.81 to 2.60 referred to "Disagree" (Low). Furthermore, 2.61 to 3.40 represented "Undecided or Neutral Level of Agreement" (Moderate), 3.41 to 4.19 referred to "Agree" (High), and 4.20 to 5.00 points referred to "Strongly Agree" (Very High).

Results

Descriptive statistics for overall attitude towards using English Language Learning Mobile Apps (MELLA) are discussed. The table 2 below showed that students' attitude toward using English Language Learning Mobile Apps (MELLA) is very good with an average mean of 4.14.

**Table 2: Saudi EFL student's attitudes toward using mobile apps in learning the English language**

No.	Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The use of e-learning in learning English has an impact on the environment less than the impact of paper books.	163	3.75	0.09
2	The advantages of e-learning applications are learning from anywhere and anytime.	163	4.67	0.05
3	E-learning for English is easy to use and attractive in design.	163	4.36	0.06
4	When I need help learning English, I can use educational electronic apps to find a specialist to help me.	163	4.02	0.07
5	The use of e-learning applications develops and helps to learn new English vocabulary.	163	4.47	0.06
6	The use of language learning applications develops and improves the language of the learner.	163	4.41	0.05
7	The use of English language learning applications increases educational interaction among learners.	163	4.13	0.07
8	One of the disadvantages of learning through electronic applications is that it is easy to switch to and engage in non-educational programs such as games, social networking sites and others.	163	4.01	0.08
9	One of the advantages of language learning applications is that it can be updated very quickly as technology evolves	163	4.31	0.05
10	Language learning applications are very useful for learners who have some hearing problems, such as deaf people and others	163	4.08	0.07
11	Language learning applications have a major role in the language learning process	163	4.24	0.07
12	Language learning applications are very useful for learners who have difficulties in movement such as balance or hyperactivity problems	163	3.86	0.08
13	Language learning applications are very useful for learners with speech difficulties, such as stuttering or difficulty speaking.	163	3.96	0.08
14	Using language learning applications for as long as possible is useful in learning the language	163	4.10	0.07
15	When I use language learning apps, I can review my conversation errors at any time.	163	4.18	0.06
16	When I use language learning applications, I can choose the skills I need to improve, whether speaking, reading or otherwise	163	4.25	0.06
17	Using language learning applications provides an opportunity to learn across multiple learning strategies	163	4.22	0.06
18	Language learning applications promote communication between parents and teachers from anywhere.	163	3.65	0.08
19	English learning applications increase self-confidence while practicing language learning	163	4.11	0.07
20	Language learning applications have developed my ability to converse with others.	163	4.01	0.07
21	Language learning applications have developed my listening skills.	163	4.17	0.07
22	Using language learning applications helped me achieve good grades in English.	163	4.01	0.07
Overall attitude towards using English Language Learning Mobile Apps (MELLA)		163	4.14	0.07

The findings of this study align with previous research conducted by Kohnke, Zhang, and Zou (2019) and Li (2018), as participants in this study also expressed agreement regarding the positive impact of English language learning apps on enhancing their language skills. Li (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of smartphones in vocabulary acquisition, while Kohnke et al. (2019) confirmed that English language learning apps significantly improved students' business vocabulary. Participants in the current study similarly highlighted the convenience, ease, and flexibility of using



these apps for learning. Specifically, 68.5% of the students reported that these apps were convenient to use, 64.5% found them easy and flexible, and 62.5% appreciated the ability to study English at any time and from any location.

In addition to these factors, 57.3% of the students noted that English language learning apps offered a wide variety of learning materials, enhancing their overall learning experience. Furthermore, 44.6% of participants indicated a preference for using these apps over traditional learning methods, suggesting that mobile learning provides a more appealing alternative for many learners. These findings are consistent with earlier research, such as Al-Fahad (2009) and Zhang (2018). Al-Fahad (2009) explored students' perceptions of mobile learning and found that 39.2% of respondents strongly agreed that m-learning provided a flexible and effective method of learning. Similarly, Zhang (2018) reported that 76.4% of students acknowledged that English language learning apps allowed them to learn English at any time, while 72.6% agreed that they could use these apps from anywhere.

In conclusion, the positive feedback from participants in this study supports the growing body of evidence that English language learning apps are highly effective in offering flexible, accessible, and diverse learning opportunities. These apps appear to cater to students' preferences for convenience and mobility, enabling them to engage with English learning materials in ways that suit their individual schedules and learning environments.

Discussion and Conclusion

With the rapid advancements in mobile technology over recent decades, mobile learning (m-learning) has become a significant force in the realm of language acquisition. Although m-learning is not a new concept, the advent of more sophisticated devices such as smartphones and tablets—equipped with advanced capabilities—has led to a surge in interest among language researchers and educators (Godwin-Jones, 2011). The integration of mobile apps into learning environments has further revolutionized the language learning experience, offering learners greater flexibility, accessibility, and convenience. M-learning enables language learners to break free from the constraints of time and location, allowing them to leverage English language learning apps to enhance their language proficiency at their own pace and on their own terms.

The present study focused on examining the attitudes of Saudi students towards using English language learning apps. The findings revealed that Saudi EFL learners generally held positive views about these mobile tools. They appreciated the flexibility that the apps provided, along with their user-friendly interfaces that made learning more accessible. Moreover, students highly valued the convenience of being able to access learning materials at any time and from any location, which allowed them to incorporate language learning into their daily routines seamlessly. These results highlight the growing acceptance and preference for m-learning as an effective



and efficient method for enhancing English language skills.

In conclusion, this study underscores the positive reception of mobile learning tools by Saudi EFL students and emphasizes the potential of mobile apps to transform language learning. The flexibility, accessibility, and ease of use offered by these apps can help foster more personalized and efficient language learning experiences. Given the increasing reliance on mobile technology, educators and researchers should continue to explore and innovate with mobile learning applications to further enhance the effectiveness of language education. Future research could investigate how these tools impact language proficiency in various contexts and identify the most effective features for maximizing learning outcomes.

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