

# An investigation into students' choices and perceptions of English vocabulary learning applications

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**Abstract:** *With the development of technology, many smartphone applications have been created to help learners learn vocabulary better. The goal of this study was to find out the English vocabulary learning applications commonly used by the students, the criteria that the students often considered when choosing the applications and their perceptions about the benefits that the applications brought to their learning. The participants of this study were 56 English-majored students at Tay Do University. This study used questionnaire and interview as the main instruments. The results showed that the most widely used English vocabulary learning applications were Duoling Go and Quizlet. In addition, the students decided to choose these applications based on several criteria such as being free of charge, ease to use, good sound and content, high interactivity, and a high review rate. The students' experiences in learning vocabulary through these applications showed that these English vocabulary learning applications were effective. This research is useful for teaching and learning English vocabulary.*

**Keywords:** *English vocabulary, learning applications, vocabulary learning, choices of applications, students' perceptions*

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary learning is an essential aspect of English learning. If you have a rich vocabulary, you can make others understand you easily. On the contrary, if your vocabulary is limited, you will have difficulty in learning English. Vocabulary plays an important role because it is the key factor that helps learners communicate. As Wilkins said, "Without grammar, little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (Wilkins, 1972, pp111-112). It can be concluded that vocabulary is a "must-have" for all language learners in any way.

Changing technology entails the development of a digital society, requiring world operators to meet the standards of global citizens. Therefore, education also needs to immerse itself in the wave of digital technology to provide curricula appropriate to the times and train talented generations for the future. In fact, in the 4.0 era, technology for learners and education has become an effective factor to help the learning process become more effective. Many governments have invested heavily in digital technology platforms for classrooms, especially foreign language programs. Their current prominent learning trend is studying English vocabulary learning applications on mobile phones. Nowadays, no one can deny English vocabulary learning applications'

benefits. The features that these applications bring are convenience, cost and time savings, and a variety of resources—learning resources and especially fun.

This research focused on students' use of English vocabulary learning applications on smartphones. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate what English vocabulary learning applications were commonly used by the students, the criteria that they considered when choosing applications, and whether these English vocabulary learning applications were beneficial and effective or not.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What English vocabulary learning applications do the university students often use in learning?

RQ2. What criteria do the students consider when choosing vocabulary learning applications?

RQ3. What are the students' perceptions about the benefits of these English vocabulary learning applications?

## 2. Literature review

Since vocabulary acquisition is considered to be an essential part of language learning, vocabulary mobile learning applications (apps) have become a popular form of mobile-assisted language learning. Recent research has shown that a mobile

application designed and based on students' needs and continuously facilitated by a teacher is effective in the enhancement of students' performance and contributes to positive learning outcomes. Despite an increasing number of mobile learning applications offering a powerful learning environment, they need to be updated and combined with new trends in education.

Thanks to their uniqueness, applications are widely used in education, including learning English as a foreign language. In comparison with traditional learning in classroom settings, the approach to learning via mobile apps is, on the one hand, very learner-centered in the sense of autonomous and personalized learning. It requires responsible and initiative students who want to improve their academic achievements.

According to Klismová (2017), characteristics such as portability, individuality, unobtrusiveness, availability, adaptability, durability, usefulness, and usability make mobile devices an ideal language-learning tool. Furthermore, students' ownership of smartphones has increased rapidly, leading to the widespread popularity of mobile technology in education, including English vocabulary learning. Current English vocabulary learning applications are constantly improving to meet users' needs.

### 3. Research methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

In this study, the participants were 56 second-year students at Tay Do University. There were 17 males and 39 females participating in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22. Before the research was carried out, the researchers had contacted the students and made sure that all of them used English vocabulary learning applications in their learning process.

#### 3.2. Instrument

##### 3.2.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of four main parts. The first part is about the student's personal information such as age, gender, class, etc. The second part (including a checkbox) was about the English vocabulary learning applications commonly used by the students. The third part (including 15 statements) was related to the criteria the students considered when choosing the applications. The last part (including 14 statements) concerned the benefits of the English vocabulary learning applications. The statements in the questionnaire were designed based

on a 5-level scale including strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), neutral (N), agree (A), and strongly agree (SA).

##### 3.2.2. Interview

For the interview session, the researcher decided to conduct a semi-structured interview where the students were asked with prepared interview questions and the researcher followed their answers up with further questions to explore their responses. The interview questions focused on the students' choices and perceptions of the English vocabulary learning applications.

### 4. Summary of the results

The students' responses from the questionnaires and interviews were reported in the following sections.

#### 4.1. The English vocabulary learning applications commonly used by the students

Overall, the statistics demonstrated that students utilized a variety of applications for learning vocabulary in which Duolingo and Quizlet were the most frequently used, indicating that these applications met the students' need for mobile learning in higher education.

#### 4.2. The criteria that the students consider when choosing vocabulary learning applications

The results showed that there were five criteria that the students considered when choosing an appropriate application for learning vocabulary.

##### 4.2.1. Being free of charge

93.3% of the students agreed that not having to pay fees when using English vocabulary learning applications was the most important criterion that they cared about. Most of them admitted that they did not have stable finances and they could not afford the paid apps. Therefore, this criterion was especially important for them.

##### 4.2.2. Ease of use

81.6% of the students agreed that they needed the applications with simple login steps and instructions for using the application included in the application's interface. Most of the students did not want to spend much time on the apps that made them confused. For them, short, concise, and easy-to-understand apps help them save self-discovery time and better understand the goals and interface of the application.

##### 4.2.3. Good sound and content

73.3% of the students agreed that good sound quality was essential in an English vocabulary

learning application. The students stated that they could feel bored if the sound was constantly corrupted, too soft or had only one tone. Besides sound, content quality was also a factor that received a lot of attention. The students were expected that topics and types of exercises should be diverse.

#### 4.2.4. High interactivity

69.6 % of the students felt this criterion was important to them. According to the students, good applications were those that could tell them whether their answers were right or wrong, and where they went wrong. Furthermore, all of the students agreed that the apps should have incentives and praise when they got right answers and encouragement to try again when they got wrong answers. The incentives and praise could help them have motivation to try again, remember mistakes and be inspired to continue practicing.

#### 4.2.5. High review rate

Overall, the data showed that 58.3% of students were interested in other users' reviews. In their opinion, reviews from other users could help them recognize whether the application was reliable and effective or not. However, some students said that this criterion was not always a key factor that made them decide to choose that vocabulary learning application because maybe that application was suitable for me but not for others. The best thing was to experience it, and those reviews were for reference only.

### 4.3. The students' perceptions about the benefits of the English vocabulary learning applications

The results showed that all of the students agreed with the usefulness of the English vocabulary learning applications. Over 90% of the students confirmed that the English vocabulary learning applications provided them with convenient access to a wide range of words and definitions, often including audio pronunciations and example sentences. 80.5% of the students said that these apps could help them improve their self-study ability. With these apps on phones, they could learn vocabulary anytime, anywhere. Moreover, some learning applications also had the function of reminding the students to study every day and having learning plans that helped them focus on the areas where they need improvement. Lastly, 75.8% of the students admitted that some learning apps helped them improve their motivation in learning vocabulary. Thanks to the gamified elements such as flashcards, quizzes, and

word games, these apps made learning engaging and interactive. Furthermore, some apps even offer weekly ranking competitions that stimulated the students to self-study to achieve high achievements.

### 5. Conclusions

The present study provided important insights into the students' choices and perceptions about the English vocabulary learning applications. The results showed that some of the most widely used and popular English vocabulary learning applications among students were Duoling Go and Quizlet. The students decided to choose these applications based on many criteria such as being free of charge, ease to use, good sound and content, high interactivity, and a high review rate. In addition, another finding was that the students found these English vocabulary learning applications very effective and beneficial.

English vocabulary learning applications are valuable tools for language learners. These apps have lots of cool features like games, videos, and ways to learn at students' own pace. They make learning fun by using games and giving students instant feedback, which keeps them interested. Besides, since these apps track how well students are doing, teachers can see where the students need more help and change their lessons to fit each student's needs. With the development of technology, teachers need to include these applications in the curriculum, not only to optimize time but also for students not to feel bored with the traditional way of learning.

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