

Thai University Students' Perceptions and Practices of Smartphone Use for English Language Learning

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Abstract

Mobile learning is now a growing trend in learning languages. Mobile devices like smartphones are commonly used by university students in their daily lives and are also commonly allowed in classrooms. There have been an increasing number of language learning applications. Previous studies have suggested that those applications on smartphones can help develop students' language skills. Conducted with English major students at a private university in Thailand, the present study aims at investigating how the students perceive the benefits of smartphones for learning English and how they use their smartphones to improve their English skills. The students were asked to complete the online survey, with Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The data collected from 122 respondents were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The results reveal the students' positive perceptions of smartphone use for English language learning (average score: 4.05/5). They agree that smartphones can help them improve their English skills – especially vocabulary, reading, and listening respectively. The results also show that most students use their smartphones to improve their English skills – especially vocabulary, listening, and reading respectively. The students' responses on open-ended questions allow teachers and researchers to learn more about their perceptions and practices. The implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: English language learning, perceptions, smartphone use

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Introduction

Mobile technology has become an essential part of our daily lives. Smartphones and other related mobile devices are widely used for social interactions. These devices are also used for other purposes: lifestyle, entertainment, health, business, education, etc. Smartphones are commonly used by teachers and students for academic purposes. Teachers use smartphones to get access to academic information, classroom management, etc. Students use their smartphones as their learning tools – to access course materials, to record class notes, to access library references, etc. (Johnson and Natarajan, 2017)

Smartphones are certainly one of useful tools for language learners as they can use their smartphones to get access to language learning practice and to gain some help on the language use. There are also a large variety of language learning applications for them to download. That allows people of all ages to learn languages easily on their own smartphones.

The present study aims at investigating how Thai university students perceive the benefits of smartphones for English language learning and how they use their smartphones to improve their English skills.

Literature review

Most university students nowadays possess smartphones. Reported in a study by Alfawareh and Jusoh (2014), 94.14% of the students at Najiran University in Saudi Arabia owned smartphones. According to a study by Hossain and Ahmed (2016), overall students showed positive perceptions towards smartphones as a tool for academic activities. The study also reported that most students used their smartphones to access academic information and do other academic activities like recording class notes.

The mobile technology is changing the teaching-learning process rapidly at the university level, and one of its main purposes is to enhance self-learning (Yedla, 2013). The students' experience of self-learning can encourage them to learn on their own for their future purposes (Yedla, 2013). With different kinds of available applications, mobile learning is creating an interactive learning environment in various contexts (Bachore, 2015). The two main characteristics of mobile devices – portability and connectivity – allow students to learn anywhere at any time (Bachore, 2015). Mobile technology offers learners new learning experiences, flexibility in learning, and immediate access to information (Darmi and Albion, 2014).

Mobile devices are also widely used by students for language learning. Among those devices the most used is the smartphone. The study by Al-Emran et al. (2016) revealed that 99% of the students possess mobile devices. The study by Muhammed (2014) surveyed EFL university students in the English Department and found that the smartphone was the mobile device preferred by all students. Nurhaeni and Purnawarman (2018) found in their study that the students considered smartphones' functions as fast and easy for them to learn English. Their study also indicated that the smartphone use can influence the students' learning strategies in autonomous learning – their cognitive and social/affective strategies can be influenced the most.

Language learning applications and websites are abundantly available for learners to learn on their smartphones. Discussed in a study by Jati (2018), most applications and websites provide learners with a fun and easy learning process on different language learning aspects.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate how the students perceive the benefits of smartphones for English language learning.
2. To investigate how the students use their smartphones to improve their English language skills.

Research methodology

The participants of the study were English major students at Dhurakij Pundit University, a private university in Thailand. They were students at different years of study: 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year, and graduating students.

The students were asked to complete a five-part Google Forms online survey, with Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. In Part 1, the students provided the background information of their smartphones. They were also asked whether they had smartphones. Only those who had smartphones were considered as the participants of the study. In Part 2, students' overall attitudes towards learning English were surveyed. In Part 3, students were asked about their language learning habits. Part 4 investigated their opinions on the benefits of using smartphones to learn English. Part 5 asked the students how and how much they used their smartphones to learn English.

The responses for the data were collected from 122 respondents: 22 1st year students, 20 2nd students, 26 3rd year students, 29 4th year students, and 25 graduating students. The collected data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics.

Results and discussion

Students' background of smartphone use:

Part 1 of the study's survey asked the students to indicate whether they possess smartphones. Then, only the students with smartphones (122 students) are the participants of the study. Table 1 shows the students' background of smartphone use. According to the reported data, most students tend to use English on their smartphones; 86.89% of them have smartphones with English learning applications and 68.03% of them set English as the language for their smartphones.

	N = 122	
	Yes	No
• My smartphone has English learning applications.	106 (86.89%)	16 (13.11%)
• I set English as the language for my smartphone.	83 (68.03%)	39 (31.97%)

Table 1: Student's background of smartphone use

As English learning applications are available in abundance for learners to download, the smartphones of most students in this study have those applications. However, the students whose smartphones do not have English learning applications can still get access to English practice on the internet with their smartphones. Moreover, it can be seen that a large number of students set English as the language for their smartphones. This may show that they also like to use English for their daily uses on smartphones. The results presented in the table can show the student's readiness and intention to learn English on their smartphones.

Students' attitudes towards language learning and their language learning habits:

The survey investigated the students' attitudes towards English language learning and their language learning habits. A five-point Likert scale was adopted – ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree” for their attitudes and ranging from 1 “never” to 5 “always” for their learning habits. The collected data are reported here as the students' background on what they believe about English language learning and how often they practice English in their free time.

1. I enjoy learning English.	4.47
2. I love to practice my English skills.	4.27
3. Learning English is important.	4.48
4. Learning English is fun.	4.30
Overall	4.47

Table 2: Students' attitudes towards language learning

1. I practice English on my own.	3.76
2. I practice English in my free time.	3.59
3. I practice my English grammar.	3.26
4. I practice my English vocabulary.	3.65
5. I practice my English listening skills.	4.08
6. I practice my English speaking skills.	3.49
7. I practice my English reading skills.	3.75
8. I practice my English writing skills.	3.16
Overall	3.59

Table 3: Students' language learning habits

The results presented in Table 2 show that students in general have positive attitudes towards language learning. This might be because they all are English major students. They tend to love to improve their English. The results presented in Table 3 show that students in general do not practice English on their own very often, especially grammar and writing. However, they tend to practice their listening skills more often than other English skills.

Students' perceptions of smartphone use for English language learning:

The results presented in Table 4 show how the students perceive the smartphone use for English language learning. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”, was adopted for this part of the survey. According to the results, the students show positive perceptions. The average score for their overall perceptions is 4.05. They believe that smartphones can help them learn

English better and improve their English skills; especially on vocabulary, reading, and listening skills respectively.

1. Students can learn English better on smartphones.	4.22
2. Students can improve their English grammar on smartphones.	3.81
3. Students can improve their English vocabulary on smartphones.	4.39
4. Students can improve their English listening skills on smartphones.	4.21
5. Students can improve their English speaking skills on smartphones.	3.66
6. Students can improve their English reading skills on smartphones.	4.27
7. Students can improve their English writing skills on smartphones.	3.56
8. Smartphones are important for students to learn English.	4.21
9. Learning English on smartphones is fun.	4.01
Overall	4.05

Table 4: Student's perceptions of smartphone use for English language learning

Overall, the students agree that smartphones can help in learning the language. These results on the students' perceptions correspond with the results reported in Muhammed's study (2014), in which 99% of the participants considered smartphones effective for English language learning. The study by Chhikara (2015) also confirmed that 100% of the students showed their positive attitudes towards using the mobile devices for language learning.

Students' practices of smartphone use for English language learning:

The results presented in Table 5 show how often the students use their smartphones to learn English in their free time. A five-point Likert scale was adopted for this part of the survey: 1 "never", 2 "hardly ever", 3 "sometimes", 4 "often", and 5 "always". The number of students' answers for each scale in each item is reported. Their answers are also presented in rating scores, and the scores are later compared with their perceptions.

According to the results, most students reported that they "always" use their smartphone for vocabulary checking (in Items No. 8, 9, 10, and 11), especially for checking the meanings of words (87 students, 71.31%). They tend to improve their vocabulary, listening, and reading on their smartphones more often than the others.

I use my smartphone ...	N = 122					score
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	
1. to learn English.	1 0.82%	4 3.28%	27 22.13%	49 40.16%	41 33.61%	4.01
2. to improve my English grammar.	2 1.64%	12 9.84%	47 38.52%	38 31.15%	23 18.85%	3.54
3. to improve my English vocabulary.	1 0.82%	2 1.64%	23 18.85%	48 39.34%	48 39.34%	4.14
4. to improve my English listening skills.	1 0.82%	6 4.92%	23 18.85%	39 31.97%	53 43.44%	4.13
5. to improve my English speaking skills.	6 4.92%	15 12.30%	41 33.61%	32 26.23%	23 18.85%	3.49
6. to improve my English reading skills.	2 1.64%	4 3.28%	28 22.95%	47 38.52%	41 33.61%	4.01
7. to improve my English writing skills.	5 4.10%	14 11.48%	45 36.89%	37 30.33%	21 17.21%	3.44

8. to check the meaning of English words.	0	1 0.82%	8 6.56%	26 21.31%	87 71.31%	4.63
9. to check the use of English words.	0	1 0.82%	13 10.66%	36 29.51%	72 59.02%	4.46
10. to check the spelling of English words.	0	1 0.82%	15 12.30%	31 25.41%	75 61.48%	4.46
11. to check the pronunciation of English words.	1 0.82%	4 3.28%	17 13.93%	37 30.33%	63 51.64%	4.28

Table 5: Student's practices of smartphone use for English language learning

Discussion on students' perceptions and practices of smartphone use for English language learning:

As compared with their perceptions of smartphone use in learning English and improving English skills in Table 6, lower rating scores can be observed for their practices. This may be because of their learning habits. They view the smartphone use as helpful for learning English, but they do not practice much on their smartphones.

	Students' perceptions	Students' practice
1. learning English	4.22	4.01
2. improving English grammar	3.81	3.54
3. improving English vocabulary	4.39	4.14
4. improving English listening skills	4.21	4.13
5. improving English speaking skills	3.66	3.49
6. improving English reading skills	4.27	4.01
7. improving English writing skills	3.56	3.44

Table 6: Comparison of students' perceptions and practices of smartphone use in learning English and improving English skills

In terms of the smartphone use for improving English skills, the lowest scores can be observed for their perceptions and practices on productive skills (writing and speaking). They tend to use their smartphones more for receptive skills (reading and listening). This may be because of a limited variety of applications focusing on productive skills. According to a review of mobile language learning applications by Heil et al. (2016), most applications focus on receptive skills rather than productive skills. As speaking and writing skills require learners to express their own ideas and produce their own language, it may be difficult to design effective applications for learners' practice. In terms of writing skills, some applications on smartphones can be used for reviewing and revising process: spelling checking or proofreading applications, for example (Muhammed, 2014).

Also, it can be seen in Table 6 that students do not gain much practice on grammar on their smartphones. Although there are a large variety of English learning applications or websites teaching grammar, the students in general do not spend much time in improving their grammar. However, this result corresponds with their language learning habits presented earlier. Some possible reasons may be that the students do not see the importance of grammar or they believe they cannot learn the grammar on their own.

The results presented earlier also show that the students consider smartphones very helpful in improving their knowledge of vocabulary and learning unfamiliar words. They use their smartphones very often in checking the meaning, use, spelling, pronunciation of English words. Nalliveetil and Alenazi (2016) pointed out in their study that students often depend on their mobile phones for word spellings, and the students may believe it is not necessary to learn the spellings as they can have their mobile phones at all times. In Heil et al.'s study (2016), vocabulary instruction was found as the main focus of the applications; however, in most applications vocabulary was presented in isolation, not in context.

How the students practice their English skills on smartphones:

One question in the study's online survey asked the students to report how they use their smartphones to practice their English skills. They were asked an open-ended question "How do you usually practice English on your smartphone?". The question was responded by 109 students (out of a total of 122 participants). Their responses on this open-ended question are presented in Table 7.

	Number of responses
• Watching English movies/series/shows	34
• Checking and learning unfamiliar English words	28
• Listening to English songs	15
• Learning from English learning applications	15
• Learning from video clips teaching English	11
• Chatting in English	9
• Read/watch/listen to news	7
• Playing English games	3
• Doing exercises on English learning websites	3

Table 7: How the students practice their English skills on smartphones

According to their responses, the students use their smartphones mainly to practice their listening and vocabulary skills. The most common way for practice is watching English movies/series/shows. This might be the most enjoyable way for them to learn English. The second most common is checking and learning unfamiliar words. This might be because knowledge of vocabulary is essential for them to learn the language and to improve their other language skills. It is interesting to point out that students tend to love practicing their skills in entertaining activities like watching movies and listening to songs. This may show that students tend to learn English when they feel it is enjoyable.

Students' additional opinions on the smartphone use for English language learning:

The last item in the study's survey asked the students to provide their additional opinions on the use of smartphones to learn English. Most students provide positive opinions. They consider the smartphone use easy and convenient. They find smartphones useful and important for learning English. They can choose to improve their weak points, and they can search for answers on some language points. However, a few students reported that they prefer to learn the language with the teachers – they love to study the language in the classroom setting.

Conclusion and recommendations

Students' perceptions of the smartphone use for English language learning are clearly seen in this study positive – they agree that smartphones can help them improve their English skills. In terms of their practices, students in general use their smartphones to learn English, especially for vocabulary checking and listening skills.

The results of the study reveal that the students gain more practice on some skills than the others. This may be because of the availability of learning applications and the students' interest. Also, the students tend to choose a fun way to learn the language; for example, a large number of students prefer to watch movies or series for their English practice.

Smartphones are important digital devices for English language learning as they allow language learners to get access to language resources anywhere at any time. Using digital devices in EFL teaching and learning provides more advantages than disadvantages as it can get students closer to real life situations and allow them to continually develop their language competence (Bucur and Popa, 2017).

However, the focus of the study's survey is only on the smartphone use for the students' practice in their free time. For classroom use, a number of aspects should be involved. Suggested in Ng et al.'s study (2017), for school-related learning activities it would be more successful if the smartphone is used in combination with strategic teacher support and social interaction among learners. For further studies, their perceptions and practices of the smartphone use for classrooms may be investigated.

The results of the present study are limited to the analysis of students' self-reports and to only 112 students. In future studies, other research tools may be adopted, a larger number of participants may be involved, and the focus may be on the effects of smartphone use on learners' achievement in improving their language skills.

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