Entertainment vs. Education: Students’ Perspectives on the Use of Apps

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ABSTRACT

The use of mobile application also known as apps is fast becoming a trend in education since it offers users fun and entertaining learning experiences. Weighing similarly important, a particular app should also offer educational opportunities to its users. The current study attempts to investigate the students’ perceptions on these two perspectives of using mobile application among students at the tertiary level education. A focus group discussion was conducted on 13 international students taking Preparatory Intensive English course in one of the university in the East Coast of Malaysia. The findings of the study revealed that an app may facilitate learning. For optimal use of app, entertainment features i.e. videos need to be integrated in the app to ensure that students can learn and play at the same time. Last but not least, multimodal texts need to be integrated in developing a language learning app to sustain students’ learning motivation.

Keywords: App, learning, entertainment

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that smart phones are among the popular device that people possess nowadays due to the ability of downloading apps (Payne, Wharrad, & Watts, 2012; Breton, Fuemmeler, & Abroms, 2011; Xu, Erman, Gerber, Mao, Pang, & Venkataraman, 2011). In recent years, it was identified that Android has 150K apps and 350K daily activations (Xu, Erman, Gerber, Mao, Pang, & Venkataraman, 2011). This shows that smartphone users are offered with many apps that can be downloaded for their individual usages. The use of smartphones is of interest because some users may be using the device for learning while others may be using them for entertainment. Previous research comparing on the use of apps for learning and entertainment has found that apps facilitate young learners to learn by navigating and using the particular device on their own (Beschorner & Hutchison, 2013). Moreover, the high-quality educational resources in the apps facilitate their users in learning vocabulary (Chiong & Shuler, 2010). On the other hand, a search of the literature identifying that an app solely functions for entertainment cannot be found. Instead there should be a balance between entertainment and education in the use of apps (Falloon, 2013). It was further argued that evaluating that a particular app can be for entertainment or learning actually depends on their design and content features (Kucirkova, Messer, Sheehy, & Fernández Panadero, 2014). Having said that, this paper explores the overview of the students from higher educational institution on the use of apps whether the latter are used for entertainment or learning. This study aimed to address the following research questions:
1. What are the views of students on the use of apps for learning?
2. What are the views of students on the use of apps for entertainment?
3. What are the criteria of the apps to facilitate language learning?

The findings from this study should make an important contribution to the field of educational technology as it provides insights into the use of technology in the educational settings. This is especially in terms of optimizing the use mobile devices as well to use the device to supplement learning. This paper begins by explaining types of mobile apps and their uses among learners. It will then go on to describe the methodology of the study. Preceding it, findings of the study will be elaborated. Finally, the conclusion supporting and contradicting the findings derive from the themes will be explained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TYPES OF MOBILE APPLICATIONS

The increasing use of smart phones has brought their users to download various mobile applications commonly known as mobile apps into the devices (Hsu, & Lin, 2014). A study conducted by Gupta (2013) found that 82% of the users’ time was spent to use mobile apps and the remaining percentage was used for e-mailing and texting. The study further showed that users used Google Play, App Store and Windows Phone Store to download these mobile apps. The mobile apps can generally be divided into two types depending on the mobile development technology that was employed to create them (Anonymous, 2013). The first type is the native mobile applications and the second is the web mobile applications. However, there is no distinct result if users were to use either of the two types mobile apps.

The native mobile applications can directly be used from the smartphones, iPads or tablets since mobile Operations Systems or platform are used. The examples of native mobile apps are calculators, built-in browsers, office applications, native versions of popular social networks (e.g. facebook app, Twitter app, etc.) and geo-location apps (Anonymous, 2013). On the other hand, web mobile applications are those software programs that run directly on users’ smartphones web browser (Summerfield, n.d.). In other words, they are run on web-hosted servers. Popular social networks, email and chatting applications, online mobile games are some of the examples of web mobile applications.

THE USE OF APPS AMONG LEARNERS

Mobile apps can be used to engage children in completing learning tasks. A study conducted by Kucirkova, Messer, Sheehy, & Fernández Panadero (2014) found that the use of apps in the iPads produced high engagement among the learners. Their engagement was shown when they were required to do a colouring task. It was evident that they were selective in pressing on specific colours and colouring formats to complete the task. They could make their own decisions in determining how the objects they were colouring would appear. This was unlikely observed when they were required to complete an iPad puzzle in that they only chose simple puzzle to solve.

The use of Mr. Phonics enables students to learn phonetics (Falloon, 2013). The mobile iPad enables learners to obtain phonics in which they could know the learning concepts of phonetics. The mobile apps also facilitate students in providing and explaining examples of words they did not how to pronounce. Learners could do some practices to identify whether their utterance of words was correct or otherwise. Interestingly, the mobile apps allowed them to pause thinking of the responses or answers for a particular question. The researcher concluded that program developers need to develop innovative ways to explore learners’ potential in using the iPad as the device may provide new learning pathways to language learners.

A study conducted by Chiong and Shuler (2010) found that there were numerous activities that could be conducted when learners used iPhones. These activities include taking/viewing pictures, placing calls, listening to music, and taking/watching videos. In terms of learning, the researchers argued that parents’ roles are essential in letting their children to play the mobile apps in the iPhone. It required parents to guide them by providing extra explanation from the mobile apps they are using. Only then learners would gain benefit from playing the mobile apps in the iPhone.

A need analysis concerning the possibility of using mobile phone among learners in a higher education for library services revealed that they appreciated such facilities (Karim, Darus, & Hussin, 2006). Majority of the respondents in the study would be subscribing the mobile apps as it would provide the flexibility in returning book to the library. In the qualitative data of the study, respondents who were staying outside the campus felt that having such services would save their time. This is especially when they did not have to go to the library to queue up only for the purpose of returning the library’s book. In short, such mobile app would offer convenient to most of the students.
An app namely program Workshop for Actively Thinking Computationally and Historically (WATCH) was used among 30 students in a university to learn history (King, Gardner-McCune, Vargas & Jimenez, 2014). In the study, students were given information about a particular history. Then they were required to reflect on the input they obtained. By using the App Inventor web interface, they could share their works with other students participating in the workshop. The data from the open-ended survey revealed that they learned history and at the same time they were happy to see that the apps they developed was downloaded by their course mates.

METHODOLOGY

Thirteen (N=13) international students studying in Universiti Malaysia Pahang were employed in the study to obtain their general views on the comparison of using an app for entertainment or education. These students are taking Preparatory Intensive English (PIE) course in the university. Their duration of taking the course ranges from five to one month. There are three female and 10 male students participated in the study. In terms of nationality, some of them are from Iraq, China, Bangladesh, Yemen and United Arab Emirates. Their selection to participate in this study is based on purposive sampling, in particular, typical case (median) sample as majority of them own smart phones (Oliver, 2006). For confidentiality, the students are identified by the alphanumerical codes (R1 to R13) in this paper.

INSTRUMENTS

An interview protocol was used as the main instrument in the study. Three open-ended interview items were written to gauge students’ evaluation concerning the use of app for learning or entertainment. The first question concerned with identifying students’ opinion on the use of app for learning. The second item required them to state whether or not an app can only function for entertainment. The final item required them to describe the criteria of an app to facilitate language learning. To ensure validity of the data obtained, triangulation was done by conducting indirect observation when students use mobile app. Meanwhile, for reliability, a peer review was conducted by asking a colleague at the English language Centre in the university to comment on the findings as they emerged (Merriam, 1998).

PROCEDURES

A focus group interview was conducted on January 2015 to collect the data for the current study. There were a few procedures of collecting the data for the study. The first procedure is in selecting the participants of the study. Their selection was made based on their familiarity of using smart phones. It was found that majority of them have the experience of using smart phones for learning and entertainment. The second procedure concerns with recruiting participants. For the study, the students were recruited three days before the actual interview was conducted. A class teacher was contacted to ask for the permission in interviewing the students. Identifying the location of the focus group is the fourth procedure the collecting data for the study. The interview was conducted in one of the Multimedia Language labs in the university. The lab is the actual class where the students have their daily classes. The fifth procedure is to identify the format of the focus group interview. Face-to-face interview was determined as its format. The final procedure was to conduct the focus group interview itself where it was conducted during the students’ class hour. This was so due to the difficulty in meeting the students after classes. The interview was conducted by the class teacher for about 40 minutes. Before the interview started, the class teacher briefed the students on the interview process. Rapport was already established among them since the teacher taught the students, and therefore, she started off the session with the first question on the interview protocol.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following the inductive process, the data was analyzed looking for information that would answer the research questions of the study. Such method enabled the authors to obtain findings based on the most frequent, dominant or significant themes that was built-in from the raw data (Thomas, 2006, p.2). While undergoing this process, all authors were responsible to review the transcripts repetitively to ensure they would be able to attain the potential meanings of the raw data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Then, they worked out the possible themes relevant for the study.
FINDINGS

Three themes emerged from the research questions that were formulated. The first theme concerns with apps facilitate learning. In answering this research question, R3 viewed that an app may help in her study especially when it is integrated with translation feature. She can learn a new word if an app has this feature. The same account concerning translation feature was given by R1. Though not exactly for learning, translation feature in an app helped him to plan for his travel. He downloaded language support software in his Android and when he uttered words in his language into his phone, Google Translate would help him to utter the English words. However, according to him, there was a drawback in using the translation software as at occasions his smart phone was not able to understand what was being uttered. R3 also downloaded the language support software as he considered that it helped him in enriching and memorizing new vocabulary. On the same note, R5 felt that learning by translating was sometimes a disappointment to him as he obtained inaccurate translation. Another interviewee; R4, however, believed that playing an app could only benefit the students by having a teacher to monitor the progress of students’ learning. He further added that teacher needed to discuss the answers with students after the latter played the app. The session could be done in or outside classes for such was necessary to ensure that students understand the content of the learning in the app. The use of app also enables students to learn grammar at any time and location. According to R10 he learnt grammar by practicing some questions using his smart phone. However, he only downloaded the app which was free.

The second theme; an app does not confine to entertainment, was developed in answering research question two concerning the argument that an app can only be used for entertainment. Majority of the students disapprove that an app is strictly for such purpose. Instead some features need to be integrated in the app to ensure that students can play and learn, all at the same time. A video is a feature that needs to be integrated in an app as suggested by respondents R11, R12 and R13. They argued that a video showing clips of movies to explain a particular learning content would be interesting to be integrated should a particular app could function as entertainment and education. The video, however, needed to have clear explanations delivered by a teacher as R13 commented, “… the apps should have online videos for learning anything by good teachers”.

The theme; assorted features for language learning app, emerged in answering the third research question concerning the description of criteria of an app to facilitate language learning. Students have different opinions when they were asked to describe the criteria of an app for language learning. For example, interface is one of the major concern that may identify an app is suitable for language learning or otherwise. A respondent; R8, argued that a language app should have a few exercises and at the same time pop-up game to avoid feeling bore when playing it. However, the latter needed to be made as an option in the setting page. Some of the students found that a language learning app should facilitate students in pronouncing words. Such was necessary as the feature may help R9 to improve his spoken English. For R6, he claimed that the feature could improve his language faster. On the same note, R3 argued that it would be interesting if students would be able to record their voices of words they did not understand. The app then would give the meaning of the words they required for translation. R3 argued that recording voices might help him in improving his listening skills. He said, “... for example if you want to learn English, the voice on the app is English, you can improve your listening”. Another respondents; R1 put it: “I can remember a lot of vocabulary if I can record my voice. I can save the words also”.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study was to identify students’ views on the use of apps for learning and/ or entertainment as well as to determine the criteria of the apps to facilitate language learning. This study has shown that apps may facilitate learning among learners in today’s era. Such finding corroborates a study by Chiong and Shuler (2010) into the use of apps for learning purposes. Their study pointed that learning can take place at any time and place when learners install a mobile app into their smartphones. Learning can take place as learners can gather, access and process information although after their classes. The research has also shown that apps could not be used for entertainment alone. Some of the students in the current study believed that integrating movie clips for a particular lesson may make apps to be more interesting and thereby minimizes students’ tence in learning. Their responses showed that learning and entertainment should not be separated. There should be a balance between the two purposes of using apps (Ahlvin, 2014). This is especially true for users of early ages. In this regards, parents need to identify appropriate apps for their children to ensure that the software may not be exclusively function for entertainment but also for academic uses. The final result of the current study shows that various features can be integrated as the criteria of an app to facilitate language learning. These criteria range from integrating pronunciation, recording and having pop-up games. The result agrees with the finding of Hunter and Daly (2013) in
that multimodal texts incorporating the combinations of sound and voice recording are necessary to be integrated in developing apps for language learning. Concerning this, vocabulary items, spelling, and pronunciation may be presented in the particular app. Although the study has successfully demonstrated that an app may be function for both; entertainment and learning, it has certain limitations in terms of the number of respondents in the study. Having a larger group of respondents is required to determine the efficacy of using mobile app for learning or entertainment. Nevertheless, these findings suggest one course of action for app teachers in general and to developers in particular in that in designing a language app, the four skills of English learning i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking need to be integrated. Godwin-Jones (2011) argues that such skills could be delivered by using text, images, and audio to develop a language app.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank Universiti Malaysia Pahang for granting a Research Grant RDU 141310. However, all the contents in this paper are of the authors’ responsibility.

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