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To Explore the Attitudes of ESL Learners to Mobile English Language Learning Apps (MELLA) for Improving English

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Abstract

This study explored the attitudes of ESL learners to Mobile English language learning apps (MELLAs) for improving English. Using a quantitative approach, a survey was conducted with 134 out of 200 university students in Sindh, Pakistan. The researcher used a closed-ended 5-point Likert scale (agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree). The data was collected online through a WhatsApp group and analyzed in MS Excel, which was presented in 10 charts. The findings highlight that students view MELLAs as a time-saving and effective tool for self-directed language learning, often preferred over traditional methods. The study also recommends enhancing both app features and learning strategies, aiming to support future research and benefit learners, educators, and stakeholders in mobile language education.

Keywords: ESL, MELLA, English Language

Introduction

Learning is fundamentally about acquiring knowledge and skills through instruction and experience. Depending on an individual's social context, this acquisition can be either self-initiated or externally driven. Various teaching-learning methodologies facilitate this process, including scaffolding, collaborative learning, peer instruction, and traditional methods (Ahmad, A., & Abduljawad, M., 2024). Historically, scaffolding served as a primary learning system, adapting to diverse cultures and the specific knowledge required by learners, encompassing life lessons, specialized skills, and religious understanding. Over time, knowledge domains expanded, leading to the development and adoption of new teaching systems through experimentation, alongside cultural shifts and evolving societal needs. The rapid exchange of knowledge, beginning in the 16th century with the Renaissance, spurred research and innovation, leading to the prominence of educational institutions, state management of education, and significant technological advancements Ali, J. K. M. (2022).

A pivotal innovation, the computer, has become increasingly compact, exemplified by the modern smartphone. The advent of the internet and its subsequent generations (2G to 5G) have democratized access to knowledge and skills globally, fostering international exchange and enabling remote learning opportunities. Mobile phone applications, gaining prominence in recent decades, have simplified numerous aspects of life across diverse fields, including

language learning. These apps have become central to language acquisition, offering easy access to knowledge, skills, and entertainment with a single click (Sato et al., 2015).

Mobile phone technology aids in activating learning processes, thereby enhancing the recall of target vocabulary (Sato et al., 2015). This has significantly increased learner autonomy in language learning, a finding supported by Nasr and Abbas (2018), who demonstrated the positive impact of mobile-assisted language learning on learners' responsibility, decision-making regarding reading content, and control over the time and place of reading. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations faced by virtual language learners, particularly those in developing countries with constrained resources. These learners often encounter issues such as scams and the time-consuming process of identifying authentic sources, compounded by the limited features of available apps. These challenges hinder complete reliance on such applications, often necessitating the consultation of other online resources. This underscores the need for careful evaluation of language learning apps to eliminate unreliable content and scams, alongside a thorough understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of acquiring knowledge through these channels.

English holds a pivotal role in Pakistan as a language of business, higher education, and social mobility, yet its teaching and learning are encumbered by persistent challenges such as outdated pedagogical practices and a reliance on rote learning (Awan&Shafi, 2016; Khan, 2011; Mohammad, Masum, Ali &Baksh, 2017; Yaqoob& Zubair, 2012). Concurrently, Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic surge in mobile technology adoption, particularly the widespread use of smartphones (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2018a), presenting a unique opportunity to integrate mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) into educational frameworks. MALL has demonstrated potential in various contexts, offering learners flexibility and accessibility (Huang, Huang, Huang, & Lin, 2012), but the mere availability of technology does not guarantee its effective utilization. Learners often encounter challenges related to technical expertise and comfort levels (Lai, Shum &Tian, 2016), necessitating an exploration of their attitudes and beliefs.

Problem Statement

The general attitudes of ESL learners towards utilizing English language learning mobile applications are currently unclear and potentially varied, hindering the effective integration of these tools into language learning practices. Understanding these attitudes is crucial as potential negative perceptions or a lack of enthusiasm could impede the successful adoption

and utilization of mobile apps for English language improvement among students. The extent to which ESL learners perceive English language learning mobile applications as useful for improving specific English language skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, reading, and writing) is not well-established. This lack of clarity presents a problem because a mismatch between learners' perceived usefulness and the actual capabilities of these apps could lead to underutilization or ineffective application of mobile learning resources for targeted skill development, which this study finds.

Objectives

- To explore the attitudes of English learners to mobile language learning apps for improving English

Significance

Investigating ESL learners' attitudes to mobile English learning apps is crucial because it addresses a growing trend in language education within a unique local context. This research can inform teachers and policymakers on how to effectively integrate these tools into teaching and curriculum development by understanding learners' perceptions of usefulness, motivation, and engagement. Identifying both the barriers and facilitators to mobile app adoption can enhance learner autonomy and contribute valuable context-specific data to the broader field of mobile-assisted language learning, ultimately paving the way for more effective and culturally relevant MALL strategies in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has become a significant influence in Western education, with integration into classrooms increasing over the past 30 years. MALL is a learning model that enables learners and teachers to exchange learning materials, information, and instructions via mobile phones, using various offline and online mobile applications (LAN & Sie, 2010). (Guy 2009) proposes that MALL can be considered a form of E-learning. The positive reception of MALL among educators and learners is attributed to its numerous advantages (Demouy & Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). In contrast to traditional teacher-centered ELT classrooms, where teachers were the primary authority and learners were often passive, MALL environments can offer more learner-centered approaches. In traditional settings, learners might have been hesitant to ask questions due to concerns about disrupting the class or facing negative feedback (Chinnery, 2006); MALL can help address such concerns.

The English language holds a prominent position in Pakistan for various reasons, with English proficiency often seen as a marker of academic and professional success and sometimes associated with social status. However, traditional teaching methods in Pakistani classrooms, particularly in early grades, often fail to adequately develop students' English learning and speaking skills (Rahman, K. 2007). These methods frequently emphasize rote learning rather than conceptual understanding, and testing systems may prioritize memorization over critical thinking (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). Consequently, there's a strong need to integrate technology, especially MALL, into the Pakistani education system to enhance English language learning. Yet, the practical implementation of MALL, including appropriate training and integration into learning methodologies, is currently lacking for learners, teachers, and institutions in Pakistan.

MALL in Education

In the Pakistani context, which is the setting for this research, the rapid growth in mobile phone ownership and supporting services has created significant opportunities for mobile learning. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) has reported success in using mobile phones for literacy training in rural areas of Pakistan. Furthermore, studies in Pakistan have shown improvements in secondary-level student outcomes and attitudes toward learning when using mobile devices (Ally et al., 2017). However, most research on mobile device use in Pakistan has focused on ownership and usage patterns, with limited specific attention to using mobile phones for language learning. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the effect of learner training on using smartphones for English writing practice.

About technology for language learning, Hubbard (2013) defines learner training as "a process aimed at the construction of a knowledge and skill base that enables language learners to use technology more efficiently and effectively in support of language learning objectives than they would in the absence of such training" (p. 164). Learner autonomy, self-directed learning, and learner strategy training are seen as interrelated concepts in learner training, especially in technology-enhanced activities outside the classroom, often without direct teacher supervision. While recognizing the positive role of learner training in technology-enhanced language learning environments and the significant advancements in technology-mediated language learning and training, Hubbard 2004) emphasized the ongoing need to prepare learners to utilize these new dimensions effectively.

Previous Related Studies

(Reinders and Balcikanli, 2011), Discussing teacher education materials, highlight the close relationship between learner autonomy and learner training or dedicated strategy training. (Sbaihi, 2015) emphasizes the need for learner training, arguing that learners cannot be expected to progress effectively toward becoming successful autonomous learners without adequate guidance and support, particularly when using technology. Similarly, Lai, Shum, and Tian (2016) note that "active engagement with technology does not necessarily guarantee sophisticated and effective use of technology for language learning" (p. 40), concluding that language learners require specific training to use technology effectively for this purpose. (Prensky, 2001) asserts that the effectiveness of technology for learning depends on learners' knowledge of technological tools, their expertise, and their comfort level with these tools. (O'Bryan, 2008) argues that traditional CALL learner training, focused on computer literacy and efficacy, is not enough to develop learner independence. This echoes earlier claims by Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) and Hubbard (2004), who emphasized the importance of teaching not only computer skills but also language learning strategies specific to CALL. More recently, Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) have emphasized that the challenges faced by language learners in CALL environments also affect learners in MALL environments. (Jarvis, 2014) Similarly, points out that even expert mobile phone users may not have full competence in using mobile phones for language learning, hence the need for guidance and training in the effective use of mobile devices as additional tools for learning languages. This study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge about learner training for technology-mediated language learning by providing insights into students' experiences in an innovative online learner training model that incorporates technical, pedagogical, and strategic training foci.

Research Methodology

Research methodology refers to the structured approach used to study and analyze a process (Ahmed, Maitlo & Rao, 2022). It encompasses the methods and techniques employed by researchers to present and interpret information (Cheema et al., 2023; Jalbani et al., 2023).

Research Design

Maitlo et al. (2025) state that research methodology includes elements such as research design, target population, sampling methods, data collection techniques, and research instruments. This study was carried out in the Department of English Language and

Literature using a quantitative research approach.

Population and Sampling

The research population refers to the broad group of individuals targeted for conducting a study (Maitlo et al., 2024). In the present study, the population comprises students from the English Department of a university located in Shikarpur. Out of a total of 200 students, a sample of 134 was determined using Yamane's formula. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

A questionnaire is a data collection method commonly used by researchers, involving a series of written questions presented to participants to gather their responses (Sugiyono, 2008:142). As noted by Arikunto (2005:152), a closed-ended questionnaire offers predefined choices. In this study, data were collected using a closed-ended 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of ten items across. The questionnaire was employed to investigate students' speaking difficulties based on their responses.

Results and Data Analysis

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Data gathered through a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) was evaluated using frequency and percentage calculations in Excel. The questionnaire included ten statements, and the results for each statement were displayed individually using pie charts to represent the percentage distribution.

Results

Chart: 1: **Do you generally think applications are a positive and helpful tool for learning English?**

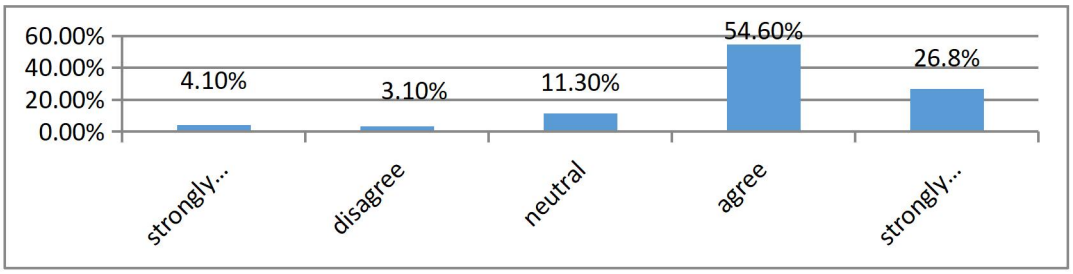

Chart: 1 shows that classroom linguistic practices are perceived to negatively affect speaking skills. In contrast, Graph 2 highlights a strong positive attitude among Pakistani ESL learners towards using mobile apps for learning English. A majority of 81.4% agreed that mobile apps are helpful, with 26.8% strongly agreeing. Only a small portion disagreed, and 11.3%

remained neutral. This contrast suggests that learners see mobile apps as valuable tools that can enhance or even compensate for classroom limitations.

Chart 2: **Has your experience with English language learning mobile apps been entirely positive?**

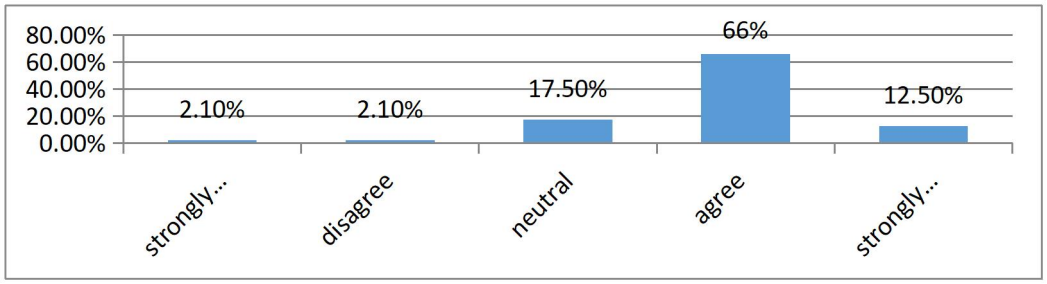

Chart 2 shows that most respondents had a positive experience with language learning mobile apps, though not all experiences were entirely favorable. Overall, 78.5% expressed a positive view, with 66% agreeing and 12.5% strongly agreeing. Meanwhile, 17.3% remained neutral, and a small 4.2% reported a negative experience. This suggests that while mobile apps are generally well-received, some users faced challenges or had mixed experiences. These findings point to possible areas for improvement and individual variation in app effectiveness.

Chart 3: **Do you feel that using mobile apps has noticeably helped you improve various aspects of your English skills?**

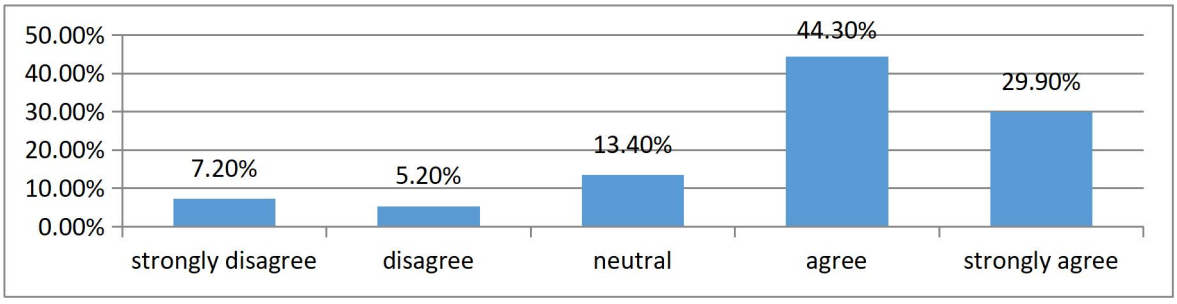

Chart 3 indicates a largely positive view of mobile apps' impact on English language learning, with 81.5% of participants agreeing. A small portion (5.1%) disagreed, while 13.4% remained neutral. Overall, the data highlights strong confidence in the usefulness of mobile apps for improving English skills.

Chart 4: **Do you think that English language learning mobile apps offer useful exercises for your learning?**

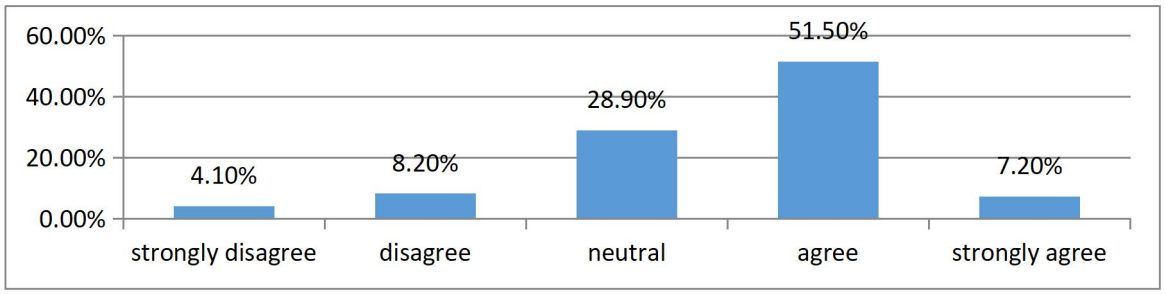

Chart 4 shows that most respondents view interactive exercises in English learning apps as highly beneficial, with 79.3% agreeing. Only a small percentage (5.2%) disagreed, while 15.5% stayed neutral. This emphasizes the importance of interactivity and active engagement in enhancing language learning through mobile apps.

Chart 5: **Do you think that English language learning mobile apps hinder your learning?**

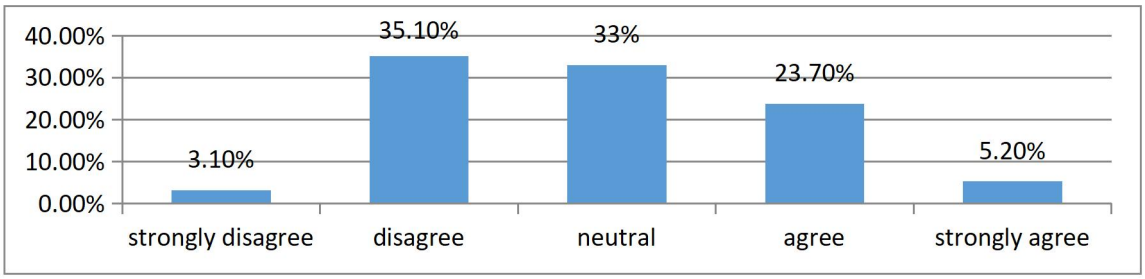

Chart 5 reflects a mixed view on whether certain features of English learning apps are frustrating or obstructive. While 38.7% disagreed with the statement, indicating they don't find the features problematic, 27.7% agreed that some aspects are frustrating. Additionally, 33.5% remained neutral. This suggests that although many users are generally satisfied, some do face challenges, highlighting areas for possible improvement by app developers.

Chart 6: **Do you believe that mobile apps for English learning are better than other methods?**

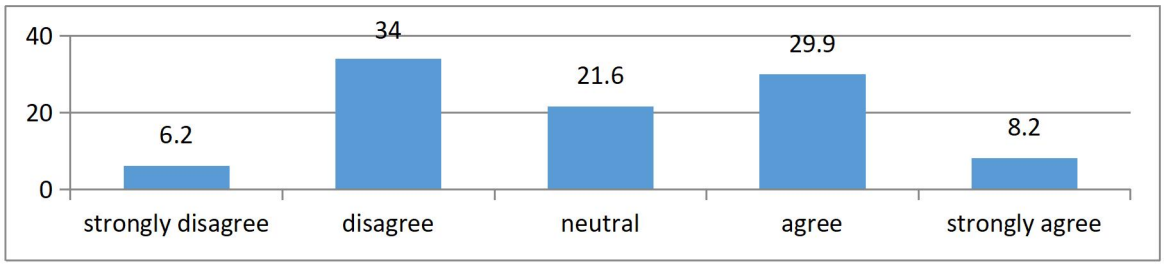

Chart 6 shows mixed opinions on whether mobile apps are better than other English learning

methods. While 42.2% disagree, 36.1% believe apps are superior, and 21.6% remain neutral. This suggests no clear consensus, with a slight preference for traditional methods over mobile apps.

Chart 7: **Do you use English language learning mobile apps frequently and for extended periods?**

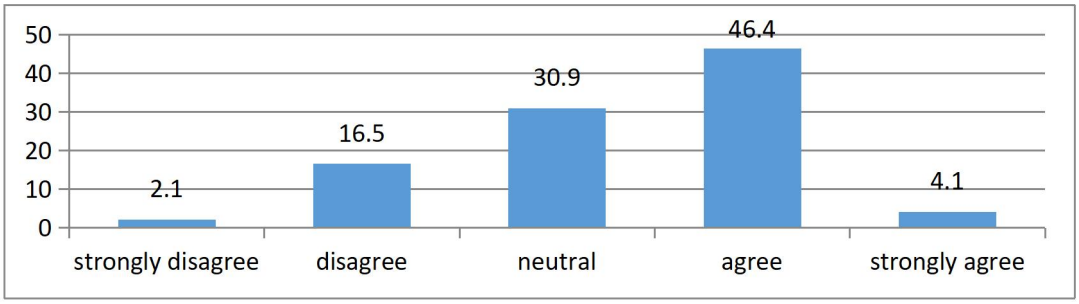

Chart 7 shows varied patterns in the frequency and duration of mobile app usage for English learning. While 50.5% use the apps frequently and for long periods, 18.8% do not, and 30.4% remain neutral. This suggests that while many users engage with the apps regularly, others have less consistent usage habits.

Chart 8: **Do English language learning mobile apps primarily give you motivation?**

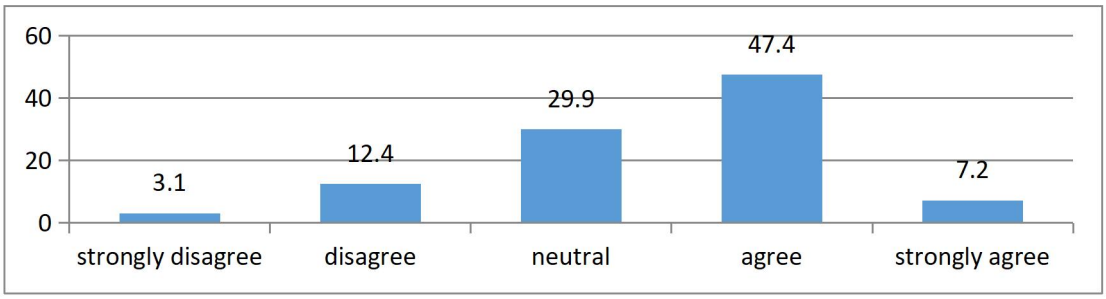

Chart 8 reveals that accessibility is a major motivator for using English learning mobile apps, with 54% of respondents agreeing. While 28% are neutral, 18.1% disagree. These results highlight the importance of easy access in encouraging users to engage with language learning apps.

Chart 9: **Do English language learning apps affect your attitude?**

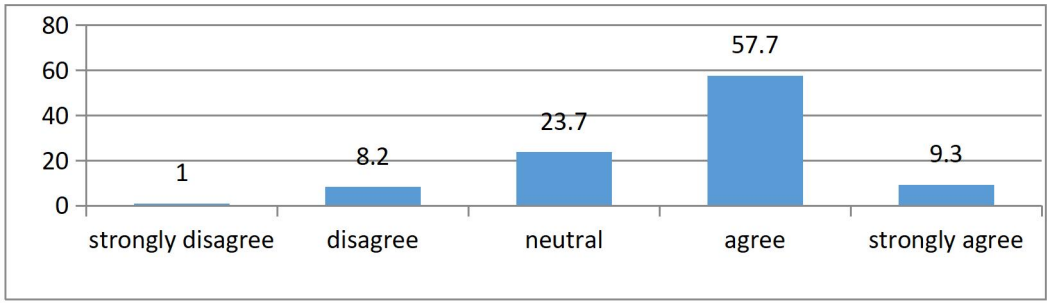

Chart 9 shows a slight positive shift in attitudes toward learning English after using mobile apps. While 35.3% report no or a negative change, 37.6% notice a positive shift in their attitudes. However, 27.1% remain neutral, indicating that the impact of mobile apps on attitudes varies among users.

Chart 10: **Do you wish English language learning mobile apps offered you feedback?**

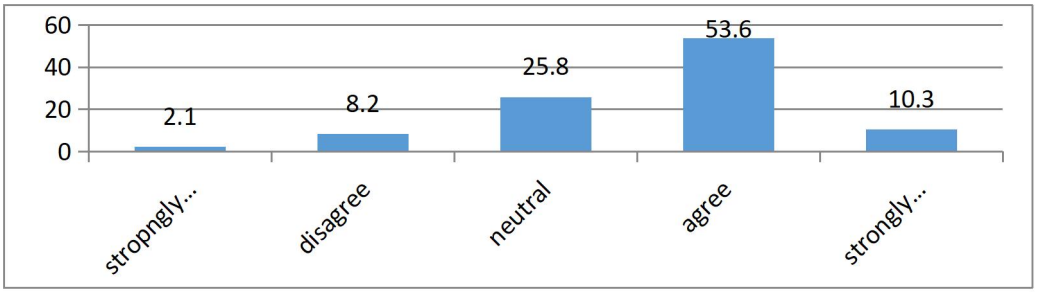

Chart 10 shows that 63.3% of respondents want more support and resources in English learning apps, such as personalized speaking feedback. While 25.5% are neutral, only 11.2% disagreed. This indicates a strong demand for improved features, especially in personalized feedback, from users.

Discussion

The study reveals that Pakistani ESL learners have generally positive attitudes toward using mobile applications for English language learning. A significant majority of respondents (81.4%) agreed that these apps are a helpful tool. This reflects a broader global trend of technology integration in education, where mobile learning is increasingly recognized for its potential to enhance learning processes and foster learner autonomy. The study focused on college students' use of mobile English language learning apps (MELLAs) and found them to be effective tools for self-directed learning that easily fit into students' daily routines without being time-consuming. Students valued the flexibility and interactive features of these apps, making them useful supplements to traditional classroom instruction (as supported by Li et al., 2023; Nehe et al., 2023). The findings show that MELLAs positively influence vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing skills. However, some limitations were noted—particularly gamification features, which, while motivating for some users, may become distracting or foster a competitive environment that could hinder learning (R Li et al., 2021).

However, while the overall sentiment is positive, the study also highlights some nuances. Not all experiences with English language learning mobile apps were entirely positive, with 78.50% reporting a positive experience. Additionally, while a large portion of

respondents (81.50%) felt that mobile apps helped improve their English skills, there was a mixed view on whether these apps are generally better than traditional methods like classroom learning or textbooks. One of the key findings is the importance of interactive exercises in these apps, with 79.30% of respondents finding them most useful. This underscores the value of active engagement and interactivity in language learning, aligning with research that emphasizes learner-centered approaches. The study also points out some challenges and areas for improvement. A notable percentage of respondents (38.70%) found some features of the apps frustrating or hindering. Furthermore, there's a desire for more support and resources within these apps, particularly for personalized feedback on speaking. Lastly, the discussion of these findings contributes to the ongoing conversation about the role of technology in language learning. It suggests that while mobile apps are generally well-received and seen as beneficial, there's room for enhancement to address user frustrations and provide more comprehensive support for learners.

Conclusion

This study explored mobile language learning apps (MELAs) and found them to be effective tools for enhancing reading, listening, and writing skills. MELAs support autonomous learning by providing flexible, on-the-go resources that empower learners to manage their progress. With smartphones, users can regularly practice skills, set goals, plan study sessions, monitor progress, and identify and correct mistakes. Some apps also offer personalized content and opportunities for peer or teacher interaction, making learning more engaging. Based on these insights, the study suggests incorporating smartphones and MELAs into English learning programs to promote flexible, self-directed skill development anytime and anywhere.

Recommendation

- Future researchers can examine how effective mobile English language apps (MELAs) are in promoting long-term language learning and the retention of English skills.
- They may also study the value of offline apps that benefit college students by providing access to learning materials without the need for an internet connection.
- Additionally, researchers can investigate how well MELAs align with individual learning styles and objectives, including the impact of adaptive learning features and personalized suggestions on student engagement and overall progress.

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