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**Mobile-Assisted Language Learning in EFL classroom at university:  
students' perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Since the first appearance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, the perspective of teachers and students on the utilization of technology for language learning has been largely discussed in the academic field, from its onset as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to its latest evolution towards Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). MALL has been considered by many researchers as a potential as well as an effective tool for language learning that provides numerous advantages. The aim of this paper is to investigate university students' perspectives on using mobile applications along with social media for EFL learning purposes, as the understanding of learners' perceptions and their experiences may assist teachers to promote the educational uses of MALL in English courses (Tri & Nguyen, 2014). After providing a brief history of CALL and its transition into MALL, previous studies on MALL's use in EFL classrooms and students' views regarding it are revised. Then, a small-scale research carried out by the author is presented. The study consisted of a questionnaire filled in by first-grade students of the University of the Basque Country in order to identify which mobile applications or activities are the most used for learning English, as well as to investigate their perspective about whether its utilization may be beneficial in a regular EFL course. The findings indicate that although learners tend to use social media more than mobile applications for EFL learning, the majority of them considered that both of them may be beneficial in English classes, which is believed to point at pedagogical implications to be taken into account by English language teachers at university.

**KEY WORDS:** MALL, EFL, autonomous learning, distance learning, ICT, students' perspective.

## **1. Introduction**

In the last decades we have experienced a noticeable augmentation in the use of technology in everyday life. This phenomenon may be likewise seen in the field of Second Language Learning, and more specifically, in English as a Foreign Language learning (EFL), as we have been moving forward from utilizing textbooks and class lectures to the incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the process of acquiring a

foreign language (FL). It should be acknowledged that the dramatic increase of ICT usage for studying a FL has certainly changed the learning process itself (Ahmadi, 2018). In the beginning, ICT was used to refer mainly to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL); yet, as stated by Khubyari & Narafshan (2016, p.58), the rapid development of technology with “the adoption of mobile multimedia devices and applications have translated into huge opportunities for studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL)”, therefore, giving rise to the Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL).

This paper aims to disclose students’ perspectives on the use of MALL in EFL learning in order to gain an insight on the ways in which technological developments are endorsed by university students in developing their language skills. For this purpose, first, I will give a brief definition of ICT, continuing with CALL and its history in EFL learning. Following, the transition from CALL to MALL will be described. Having explained the change, the paper will focus on providing a review of previous studies on students’ perspective of the advantages of MALL in EFL learning through the use of smartphone applications and social media, along with its perceived benefits in EFL classrooms. Subsequently, I will present a small-scale study I conducted, which consisted of a questionnaire administered online to university students in their first year of the degree in English Studies. The purpose of the study was to determine the frequency of usage of different applications together with social media for EFL learning activities, as well as to investigate their perspectives of MALL’s integration in EFL classrooms, since its use in mainstream EFL teaching in Spain is not yet widespread. Afterwards, the main findings of the study are presented, together with the discussion, and, finally, conclusions are drawn and pedagogical implications of MALL’s inclusion in EFL teaching are proposed.

### **1.1. Definition of ICT**

As already acknowledged, technology is an important part of our lives, gaining more and more weight throughout the years. In this way, ICT was defined by Blurton (1999, p. 46) as:

“A diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information. (...) They are not single

technologies but combinations of hardware, software, media, and delivery systems”.

These technologies include devices such as desktops and notebooks. For the sake of narrowing such a broad definition, the following sections will focus on computers as well as mobile phone devices.

In a similar way, the *International ICT Literacy Panel* (2002) reported that the application of ICTs is at the cutting edge in the modern and globalized world through the use of the networks and communications that allow the management of the information adapted to a society with greatest access to different types of knowledge. Additionally, as acknowledged by İşman (2012, p. 207), technology is defined as “the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area” which means technology is the sum of concrete cognition about a technical subject. From this perspective, it might be stated that in order to achieve usefulness, for each specific educational purpose the appropriate technologic methods need to be utilized. Likewise, İşman (2012) highlights that the use of technology cannot be simplified to the mere practice of learners with machines, but also with other learners and their environment.

Due to the fast development of new technological devices, their presence in language classrooms has been gaining momentum over the last few decades, up to present circumstances which somehow prioritized and boosted ICT use, despite teachers’ usual reticence towards it. However, we should bear in mind its beginnings, which are described briefly in the next section.

## **1.2. History of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), as its name indicates, concentrates on supporting the learning processes with the aid of computers (Gündüz, 2005). According to Warschauer (1998), CALL dates back approximately to the 1960s, although at the beginning it was not widely investigated by researchers. However, with time it gained more importance in language learning; in this way, three different stages can be distinguished: Behavioristic CALL, Communicative CALL, and Integrative CALL.

In the first period, known as the Behavioristic CALL, computers were viewed as “mechanical tutors” who permitted learners to study individually, with the help of grammatical explanations as well as translations (Warschauer, 1998). In other words, its primal focus centered on the usage of memory through the repetition of patterns. For Bax (2003), Restricted CALL would be a more appropriate term to refer to this stage, as in that way it could not only describe a theory attributed to this period, but also the types of activities proposed by ICTs, teacher’s role, as well as the software used, all of which can be described as ‘restricted’.

The period of Communicative CALL appeared between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, providing a closer approach to cognitive theories, which supported the development of a modern learning process based on the practice of languages in more authentic scenarios. The upgrade of CALL software was consistent with these theories, as it allowed programs which included activities such as text reconstruction along with simulations, thus leading to work individually as well as in pairs or groups; students could make discoveries about the language and the meanings, enabling them to discuss these revelations collectively. In this way, the importance was given to the communication among learners while using the computer, as opposed to the previous stage, which focused on the interaction of students with computers (Warschauer, 1999).

By the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, numerous teachers started to adopt social-cognitive theories, emphasizing the need for real social contexts for language learning. This view, along with the increase of access to technology as well as to the Internet, transformed CALL into a tool which allowed the improvement of skills such as listening, reading, speaking and writing, all of them could be performed in authentic settings, giving rise to the integrative CALL (Warschauer, 1999). Additionally, CALL started to be viewed as a tool for communication, a situation that propitiated learners to interact not only with the teacher but with other learners worldwide (Gündüz, 2005).

In this context of great increase in access to digital devices in the late 1990s, the learning process has changed completely. According to Prensky (2001), learners that have been in contact with technology since they were born are known as *Digital Natives*; these *Digital Natives*’ usage of digital devices has provided them an apparently inherent brain ability to understand digital data and work with computer tools, thus the old language learning methods are no longer useful for them. However, they are taught by *Digital Immigrants*,

whose knowledge of technology appeared later in their lives, therefore making them unable to adapt their course contents to digital forms. In order to solve this dilemma, Prensky (2001) suggested that new teaching methodologies are required, as well as the need for new content and thinking towards the use of ICTs in EFL learning.

### **1.3. The transition from CALL to Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)**

At the beginning of the 21st century, CALL was substituted by a new phenomenon known as mobile learning (m-learning). The term Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is developing fast in EFL learning (Bouzidi, 2015). Hence, O'Malley *et al.* (2005, p. 7) described MALL (or m-learning) as follows:

"Any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not in a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by the mobile technologies".

The change may be seen as inevitable in today's hectic and globalized world, as each time a steadily increasing amount of people require virtual classes, rather than face-to-face. Therefore, the development of MALL has provided the chance of learning ubiquitously, in an autonomous way, through different language learning applications for smartphones (Parejo-Lora *et al.*, 2013). Following this line, a survey conducted by Alhassan (2016) with university students, showed that one of the main advantages mentioned was the availability of facilities such as ubiquity, which were not accessible in the past. Moreover, the use of MALL increased motivation along with the interaction between learners; therefore, the need of implementing m-learning as integral parts of their courses seems essential. However, in order to successfully fulfill this educational need, Woodrow (cited in Liu, 2009, p.101) argues that "the development of positive user attitudes towards the new technology" is required. For that purpose, several investigations regarding learners' perspectives on MALL will be tackled in the following sections.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Previous studies on students' perspective of MALL in EFL learning**

In general, numerous studies reported that learners hold a positive attitude towards the utilization of mobile phones in EFL courses. For instance, a study carried out by Steel (2012) highlighted that having the opportunity to master a language without time or place restrictions was suitable for undergraduates' busy schedules. Subsequently, they found MALL applications easy to use and understand.

In 2016, Khubyari & Narafshan investigated the perspective on MALL of EFL Iranian EFL students whose reading comprehension was quite poor, by administering reading tests on their mobile phones to each of them. Hence, the results demonstrated that participants manifested preference for using mobile phones due to the fact that their portability in addition to their presence in daily life permitted learning tools to be more accessible; subsequently, they revealed as well that the prevalence of MALL was significantly superior in regard to understanding written texts. Similarly, Yurdagül & Öz's (2018) research showed that the majority of learners used mobile phone applications for different educational purposes such as listening and watching films in the target language, so as writing practice among other practices. Likewise, findings revealed that students view language learning more engaging when they do it collectively; in the form of competing as well as chatting to share information.

Another study performed by Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam (2011) manifested similar results in favor of MALL. The research consisted of providing grammar instruction to the students in order for them to have oral discussions afterward. The sample was composed of two groups: the experimental group and the control group. One of them was assigned with special grammar section commands, along with the opportunity to record their speech on their mobile phones, so that they could correct their mistakes as well as discuss them in class the next day. On the contrary, the control group lacked this type of mobile phone advantage, while receiving only the traditional grammar instruction. The results evidenced that the correct use of MALL can be successful regarding the improvement of grammar accuracy.

In a similar way, Dashtestani (2013) administered a questionnaire to 73 EFL teachers and 126 undergraduates in order to examine their perspective on using online dictionaries. The findings indicated a positive disposition towards their utilization, considering that they enhanced pupils' vocabulary learning due to their availability. Additionally, the majority of the students utilized it more in their mobile phones rather than on their computer; besides, it



was discovered that the purpose of usage was mainly to “read the definition of entries” (Dashestani, 2013, p.59). Furthermore, Kwangsawad (2019) analyzed university undergraduates’ perspectives on the use of MALL in EFL learning classes, discovering that it might be more productive, fun, as well as beneficial in the classroom. Nevertheless, some of the participants identified problems, one of which was that students considered that teachers should incorporate its usage in an appropriate way.

Additionally, Alkhunaizan (2019) explored students' perspectives on WhatsApp app. The results reported that although they were not aware of the use of some mobile phone devices as learning tools, after being correctly instructed most of them started to regard WhatsApp as a useful tool. Moreover, they responded in favor of integrating mobile applications as part of the regular courses. In the same way, a study done by Almekhlafy & Ali (2016) revealed that the usage of this social mobile application (WhatsApp) as a communication tool for EFL learning enables learners to enhance their skills in the target language by communicating appropriately with native speakers; thus ameliorating the learning process as well as students’ autonomy for language-related goals.

Nevertheless, a report by the British Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2009) pointed out that some students are more skilled in using software applications rather than learning through them, as teachers usually focus on the first matter and not on students’ acquisition of knowledge. In order to solve that problem, Attewell, Savill-Smith, & Douch (2009) stated that professors should receive training in how to use technology in order to be able to prepare materials that are effective for learning. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that not every learner has access to technological devices, although most of the parents invest in having internet access at home (Livingstone, 2009). However, m-learning entails more benefits than disadvantages, some of which will be highlighted in the following section.

## **2.2. Benefits of MALL in EFL through smartphone applications**

As stated by Jeng, Wu, Huang, Tan, & Yang (2010) the use of mobile phones for studying is the basis of m-learning. Subsequently, there has been an increase in the creation of smartphone applications in regard to mastering English (Kim, Rueckert, Kim, & Seo, 2013). Rosell-Aguilar (2018) reported that a great number of EFL students rely on language

learning applications for improving their English, therefore making them their unique source of knowledge. In some cases, pupils do not have access to practicing English in authentic contexts, and their hours of English classes are limited. Language learning applications may be considered as a unique solution for enhancing their skills outside the class; therefore, it is recommended that teachers encourage the use of the existing accessible devices (Hidayati & Diana, 2019). However, when creating such programs or analyzing their utility, it is relevant to know if the potential users actually make use of them and what they think of them so that educational apps respond to the authentic needs of EFL learners.

In this way, Zou & Li (2015) inspected students' perspectives about specific applications for EFL learning. In this research, firstly the participants accomplished four tasks by means of given applications, which consisted of exercises of listening, speaking, and reading, both in class and outside the class. Afterward, they filled in a questionnaire whose results indicated that 70% of them were positively inclined towards applications such as BBC learning English and TED talks used as tools to improve listening skills. Additionally, students felt more comfortable when using their mobile phones to discuss lessons through the class forum instead of doing it in the classroom.

Furthermore, Ritonga (2020) explored college undergraduates' attitudes towards the implementation of a well-known mobile application called Duolingo, used for language learning. Initially, the participants were questioned about their knowledge of this smartphone application. The majority of the respondents (80%) were familiar with it and another 15% had heard about it, whereas only 5% were not aware of its existence. Subsequently, 85% of the surveyed thought that Duolingo may help in regard to mastering English vocabulary, listening, writing, and speaking together with reading. Another 10% felt that Duolingo may aid them in expanding their knowledge of vocabulary, while 5% thought it can enhance their writing skills.

Similarly, Livemocha is another well-known mobile phone application used for language learning in an autonomous way. In order to identify students' perceptions about this application, Andriani & Bansa's (2014) investigation consisted of administering a questionnaire along with carrying out an interview with undergraduate students on their opinion about the application Livemocha. The findings showed that the app was perceived as a useful tool for enhancing competencies dealing with vocabulary, listening, writing as

well as grammar skills. Additionally, the interviewees received feedback (from native speakers) about the language usage as well as linguistic aspects. The negative point identified in this research was that in order to participate in the speaking part, learners were requested to use a microphone, yet not all of them possessed one.

A recent study by Hidayati & Diana (2019) examined students' motivation regarding the use of MALL applications (more specifically, Duolingo and Hello English) and the frequency of their use. The findings indicated that the participants felt more comfortable at home when doing exercises which included recording their speech. However, the research revealed as well that there was no correlation between subjects' enthusiasm and the amount of time using these applications. Besides, when using Duolingo some of them did not pay attention to the automatic feedback provided by the app, as they answered quickly to the questions in order to obtain the necessary points to escalate to the next level. A similar issue happened with Hello English, as participants dismissed daily tips as well as daily words. Therefore, although both applications present their advantages, their usage seems to be rather superficial.

The results of these studies indicated that mobile applications, when employed in a correct way, might induce EFL students to practice as well as improve their English skills. Likewise, the findings pointed out the need for implementing MALL, and mobile phone apps, in EFL classrooms as a more widespread teaching practice, as students were generally enthusiastic about their educational use.

### **2.3. Benefits of MALL in EFL through social network media**

Although social networks' principle may be essentially based on social functions, it has been as well contemplated as a valuable device for language learning purposes (Stevenson & Liu, 2010). As already acknowledged, mobile learning has paved the way for learning outside the classroom. In this sense, Kannan (2018) introduced the term "ubiquitous learning", in which the omnipresence of mobile phones is the key element. In this section, the potentially beneficial use of such social media as Facebook and Instagram for EFL learning will be discussed.

As suggested by Hatane & Wijaya (2010), the Internet can be highly useful as a language learning tool. For instance, it can prompt students to share their creative writings (such as poems, essays or stories) with their colleagues, thus they are no longer mere consumers, but also content creators. Likewise, it improves thinking skills as well as reading skills (when learners are asked to search for specific information). Additionally, the network permits students to work online to communicate with native speakers, so that undergraduates can practice the target language in real conversations. It should be noted that social skills also develop from this type of engagement. In this way, Hatane & Wijaya (2010) implemented the use of Facebook discussion boards among students from the English Department. Findings indicated that students preferred Facebook discussions rather than class discussions in groups as they felt more comfortable in a virtual environment than in a face-to-face class, understanding better the written discussions than oral debates. The main constraint faced by the participants was to suggest new subjects for discussion, as only interesting topics seemed to engage others to participate. Following this line, Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg (2018) highlighted the main benefits of collaborative language learning with mobile phones, such as lowering anxiety levels, encouragement between classmates, and gaining awareness of some linguistic features, among others.

Another instance of social media learning could be the platform of Instagram, which serves an analogous purpose as Facebook. Khalitova & Gimaletdinova (2016) identified several advantages from their study about the mentioned social media. A questionnaire administered to university learners revealed that if they showed a disposition towards autonomous learning, they were able to enhance listening skills, since this social network's publications include videos. Instagram is an application that they can use whenever, independently of their location. Additionally, Arif (2019) explored EFL learners' attitude towards the use of social media for language learning, discovering that the most used by EFL learners was Instagram. Furthermore, a large number of the participants believed that social media can enhance their writing and communicative skills. Similarly, as stated by Habibi *et al.* (2018) the implementation of social media in EFL classrooms may serve "for communication, discussion, interaction, and doing or submitting the assignment".

As observed in this section, previous studies have reported that, overall, learners display a positive disposition towards the utilization of mobile phones in EFL courses. In this way, Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2007) predicted that in the future MALL would be legitimate

and indispensable in EFL teaching worldwide. Despite this prediction, in the case of Spain CALL has been progressively endorsed in the university EFL classrooms, but MALL seems not yet given presence in mainstream EFL teaching, as the methodology applied at some universities is still rather traditional. The following study seeks to comprehend students' disposition towards the use of mobile phones for EFL learning, as well as their frequency of use (of both smartphone applications and social media), especially in a non-English speaking country where there is little input of the target language. The understanding of it may shed light of how MALL practices may be included in English courses in the future, as most of the participants are potentially future EFL teachers after finishing this degree (i.e. English Studies).

### **3. The study**

#### **3.1. Research questions**

In recent years, smartphones have become a crucial device for EFL learning. A large body of research has shown that their use provides several advantages when incorporated by lecturers in English classes. These benefits are mainly related to the ubiquity as well as the availability of mobile phones, thus it enables students to learn in an autonomous way. The present study focused on examining students' frequency of the use of specific mobile applications for learning English as well as some nonspecific applications (e.g. social media). A better grasp of their autonomous use of MALL in EFL learning and their perspectives on its classroom implementation may serve to understand how to best incorporate MALL in English learning courses as a more widespread practice. The following research questions were tackled in the study:

- 1) How often do EFL students use mobile applications for learning English?
- 2) How often do they use social media with the purpose of learning English?
- 3) How useful they believe mobile apps and social media are for EFL learning?
- 4) What is their view on implementing the use of MALL in their regular EFL courses?

### **3.2. Participants**

The participants in this study were 31 EFL students from the first year of English Studies at the University of the Basque Country in Spain (aged 17-22). No gender distinction was made between the participants. All of them possessed a smartphone in order to know their use of MALL as well as MALL-related activities they perform habitually. Likewise, all of them were enrolled in English language courses.

### **3.3. Instrument and Procedure**

The instrument consisted of a questionnaire composed of 2 background questions and 29 items concerning students' use of smartphone applications (in which social media were included) along with their views about use of MALL in EFL courses. It was administered to first-grade university students (mean age range 17-22) as an online questionnaire. It was designed to obtain frequency percentages of students' use of MALL and the degree of usefulness of certain apps.

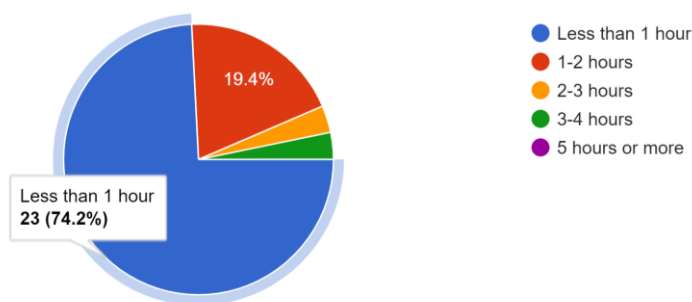
Specifically, the questionnaire consisted of 18 Likert scale (1-5) items on the usefulness of mobile phone applications and social media for foreign language learning as well as their frequency of usage, also represented through the case of online dictionaries; other 4 questions targeting the purposes for which students utilize both smartphone apps and social media were included, as well as 6 items concerning the way in which social media and mobile applications may be beneficial in EFL learning. An open-ended question was added at the end to give the students the possibility of expressing their opinion on the issues dealt with in the questionnaire freely. The full questionnaire is included at the end of this paper (see Appendix).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Mobile phone applications**

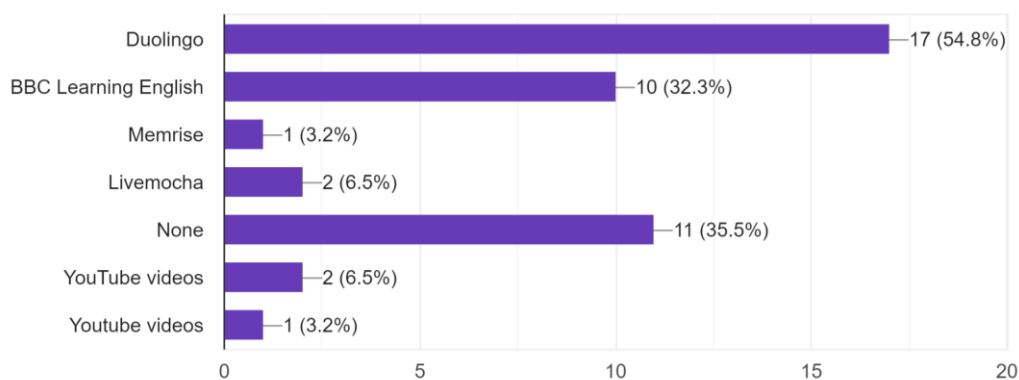
Regarding the frequency with which the students used smartphone applications for learning and/or improving their English skills, almost 60% (18 students) claimed to use apps very

occasionally. Only a small portion of the students (3.2 %) affirmed to employ these mobile applications for English learning almost every day. Regarding the amount of time spent using learning apps weekly, most of the participants (74.2%) indicated that they used them less than 1 hour per week (as can be observed in Figure 1), while the rest reported spending more time (up to 3-4 weekly hours).



**Figure 1. The frequency of using smartphone applications for learning/improving English (weekly).**

Likewise, when they were questioned about which of the mentioned applications they employed in the last 3 years, it was found that Duolingo was the most popular one (54.8%), followed by BBC Learning English (32.3%), and YouTube videos (9.7%), while Livemocha and Memrise were the least utilized (6.5% and 3.2%, respectively). Nevertheless, as illustrated in Figure 2, more than a third of the students declared that they did not use any mobile application for learning or improving English at all (35.5%).

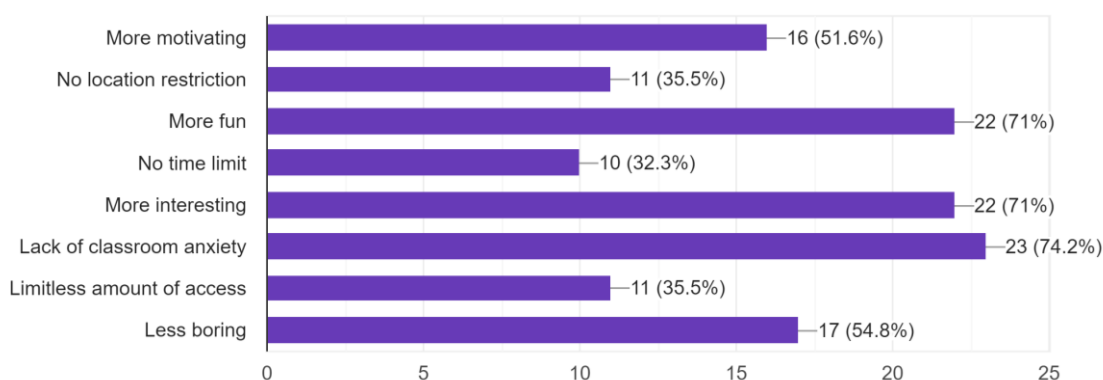


**Figure 2. Applications used for learning English in the last 3 years**

Concerning the purpose of using mobile applications, a large number of learners used them in order to improve their writing skills (45.2%), reading skills (35.5%), and speaking skills (19.4%), and, to a lesser extent, their grammar skills (9.7%) and vocabulary (6.4%).

However, 8 students (25.8%) were not concerned with enhancing any skills in particular. Additionally, the usefulness of the mentioned applications was also taken into account. Considering the most salient results, BBC Learning English was the app which received most positive answers, followed by Duolingo, which was considered at least moderately useful by the majority of the participants (22). On the other hand, Memrise, HelloTalk and Livemocha were considered moderately useful, or not useful by the respondents.

When asked about the reasons why mobile English learning apps can be helpful, as shown in Figure 3 below, the majority of the students stated that mobile learning apps may reduce classroom anxiety (74.2%), make learning more interesting and more fun (71%), less boring (54.8%), and more motivating (51.6%). To a lesser extent, students also believed that the positive side of mobile apps is that they have no location restriction (35.5%), they permit limitless amounts of access (35.5%), and no time limit (32.3%). The students could choose more than one answer.



**Figure 3. Usefulness of smartphone applications for learning English**

As far as the way in which the apps may be useful to improve their English, the vast majority of the students considered them helpful to ameliorate listening skills (83.9%), writing skills (77.4%) and reading skills (74.2%), following by the improvement of speaking skills (54.8%). Only a small percentage of the participants (3.2%) suggested that mobile learning apps can aid enhancing grammar skills.

With respect to the weekly use of online dictionaries, 38.7% of the students answered that they use them often, 29% use online dictionaries a few times a week (3-4 days), whereas 19.4% do it almost every day, or always (6.5%). Only a few students reported never checking online dictionaries. The vast majority of the students reported using online



dictionaries to check the meaning of the word (93.5%), look for synonyms/antonyms (71%), to check the pronunciation (48.4%), or to check the English definition (38.7%). In addition, they were asked whether they used online dictionaries more often on their computer or on their smartphones, and their responses revealed that a large number of students (41.9%) do consult them on both equally, others resort mainly to their computers (35.5%), while only a small percentage (19.4%) use dictionaries mostly in their smartphones.

Concerning the analysis of the advantages of using smartphone applications for English learning, all of the evaluated benefits: no location restriction, no time limit, lack of classroom anxiety, and limitless amount of access were regarded as very relevant, being the unlimited access the most highlighted relevant aspect. Additionally, some students mentioned other advantages of apps, such as the fact that it is cheaper (some of the apps are free), the possibility of learning slangs, the possibility of obtaining interesting information in English, their ubiquitous nature (access anywhere and anytime), no need to carry books, or the possibility they give of improving pronunciation.

In another question about the benefits of smartphone applications, the majority of the participants considered that using smartphone applications can make an English class funnier (77.5%), and less boring (61.3%). Equally, continuing with the benefits of skills of using mobile learning applications, students were demanded to mark which skills they think they can improve through their usage. The most mentioned ones were reading skills (77.4%), writing skills (74.2%), and listening skills (71%). The least marked option was 'speaking skills' (32.3%).

On the downside, when asked about the disadvantages of applications for learning English, the students mentioned, among others, the lack of contact with a real teacher:

*'[It is] not the same as a real teacher, [it's] better being taught by a person and with other classmates.'*

The impossibility of clarifying doubts was also mentioned:

*'You might not find a direct and clear answer for a doubt, unlike in class with the teacher.'*

As well as some issues with understanding and quality of input received:

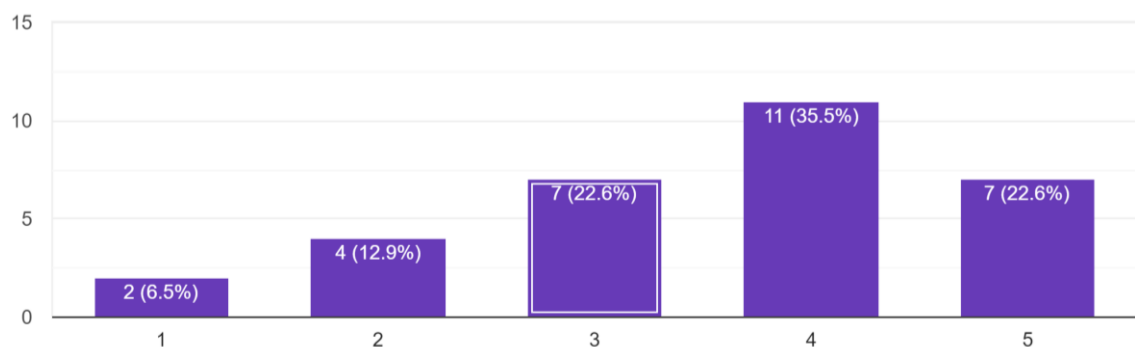
*'Sometimes native speakers speak worse than us in social media.'*

*'Some of them do not offer a quality teaching'.*

Some students mentioned that apps may rather be a distraction, while others mentioned that some may face Internet connection issues. In the same way, it seems that the use of smartphone applications in English courses is not considered a good way for instructors to communicate with the students, since the majority of the students kept a neutral position.

Moving on the focus towards their opinion about teachers' role, students were asked if they think teachers were willing to implement mobile learning in their courses. The results showed that the majority of the students were neither positive nor negative (51.6%), whereas 29% were positive. The rest (19.4%) showed an unfavorable view on this issue. Regarding the question whether they considered that teachers had enough knowledge and skills to use mobile applications for teaching English, most of the responses were again neutral (45.2%).

Regarding the students' opinion towards using mobile applications in their classroom, the majority of them agreed that mobile applications for language learning should be included as an integral part of the regular courses (45.2%), although a third (35.5%) showed a neutral stance. Also, when asked about their willingness towards spending time using mobile apps additionally to the classroom work, rather than practicing with traditional homework, only 6 students showed a negative disposition, while the majority agreed they would prefer this kind of practice (see Figure 4 below).



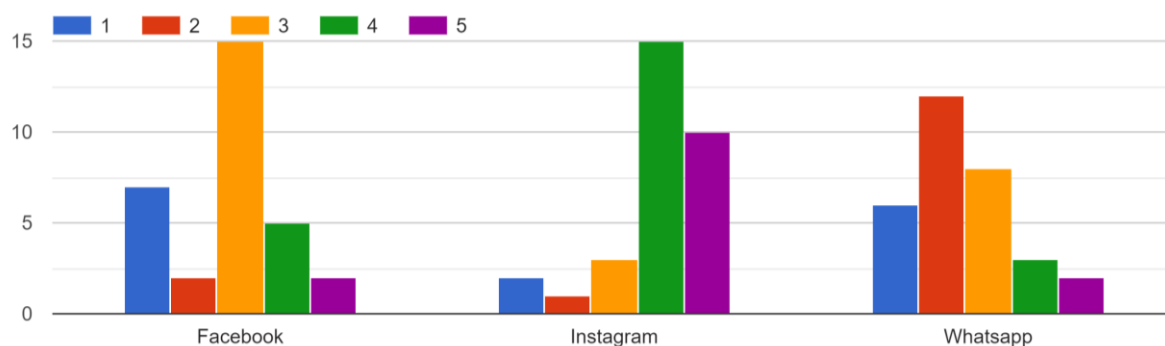
**Figure 4. Willingness to practice with mobile applications outside the classroom. (on a scale 1=totally disagree to 5= totally agree).**

Similarly, the vast majority of the students (77.5%) agreed that teachers should encourage students to make more use of mobile applications for learning English.

## 4.2 Social media

As far as the use of social media for language learning is concerned, 48.4% of the surveyed stated to use social media almost every day for English learning purposes, whereas 29% said to do it a few times a week (3-4 days) and only 7 (22.6%) affirmed to employ social media for English learning purposes very occasionally. Regarding the types of social media they utilize for learning or improving English, the results show that Instagram is the most popular one, as 15 participants stated that they always utilize this app for EFL practice purposes, and 12 do it often. On the other hand, WhatsApp appears to be used rarely (9 participants) or sometimes (6), with Facebook as the most unpopular one, as almost all of the participants (26) said they never practice English with this app.

When asked about the usefulness of the mentioned social media, the results show that the frequency of usage of certain social media is closely related to its perceived usefulness. Hence, as shown in Figure 5 below, Instagram is considered as the most useful social media for English learning, marked by 25 participants as 'useful' or 'very useful'. Facebook would be in the second position, reaching 15 mentions for 'moderately useful', with WhatsApp presenting a clear tendency towards the negative side.



**Figure 5. Perceived usefulness of some social media (1=not useful, 2= slightly useful, 3= moderately useful, 4=useful, 5=very useful)**

Almost all participants considered social media a good way for students to communicate with native speakers (90.3%). No negative point of view was recorded in this item. With regard to the ways social media can be useful for learning English, the results show that students considered social media can make the learning process more fun as well as more interesting (74.2%), they also agreed that in this way, it can be less boring and more motivating (67.7%). On the other hand, results reveal that no time limit (54.8%), lack of classroom anxiety (51.6%), limitless amount of access (48.4%) and no location restrictions (38.7%) are also taken into account as ways in which social media can be useful when learning a language. The vast majority of participants (77.4%) affirmed that learning English through social media presents more advantages than problems, whereas only a few of them stated otherwise.

## **5. Discussion**

Even if the students admitted using mobile apps to enhance their English skills only occasionally, they seemed to acknowledge their usefulness for EFL learning. When participants had to rate smartphone applications' advantages, all of them were regarded as very relevant: no location restriction, no time limit, lack of classroom anxiety, and limitless amount of access. In a similar way, Khubyari & Narafshan's (2016) investigation results demonstrated that participants manifested a preference for using mobile phones due to the fact that their portability in addition to their presence in daily life permitted learning tools to be more accessible.

Likewise, one of the discussed applications was Duolingo, which was found to be the most popular as well as a useful mobile software for EFL learning among students. Identically, Ritonga's (2020) questionnaire results evidenced the popularity of Duolingo along with its usefulness. On the other hand, Livemocha was identified to be very useful from students' perceptions in Andriani & Bansa's (2014) research, despite not being as popular as Duolingo. However, in the present study, only two participants were familiar with this mobile phone application, who identified it as 'not useful'. Furthermore, when students were asked about the usage (and usefulness of certain mobile phone applications, 10

students confirmed that they have used BBC learning English, considering it very useful. This is in line with Zou & Li (2015), whose findings indicated that 70% of the participants were positively inclined towards applications such as BBC learning English for improving listening skills.

When participants had to indicate in what way the utilization of mobile phone applications may be beneficial, only a small portion of students suggested that mobile applications can be useful for enhancing grammar skills. This finding is contrary to Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam (2011), who proved that the correct use of MALL can be successful regarding the improvement of grammar accuracy. It seems that Basque university students were more concerned about writing and reading skills when using apps, rather than grammar and that is why they have not acknowledged apps' usefulness to enhance this particular skill. It might be that they prefer using some other apps which were not mentioned in the questionnaire. A follow-up qualitative study with the participants could shed some light on this matter.

Furthermore, a great part of the participants stated that the implementation of mobile phone applications can make the learning process more fun, therefore showing similar results as in Kwangsawad's (2019), as students considered MALL to be productive, fun, as well as beneficial in the classroom.

Some of the items of the questionnaire were related to the usage of online dictionaries. The present study revealed that students use dictionaries in both their computer and their mobile phone, while only a small percentage of the participants employed them only in their smartphones. Compared to Dashtestani's (2013) research about online dictionaries, the majority of the students utilized them on their cell phones due to its easy accessibility. However, both studies coincide with the purpose with which students use online dictionaries: to check the meaning/definitions of the words in the target language.

Concerning social media, one of the applications mentioned in the questionnaire (WhatsApp) was found to be the least utilized as well as considered to be the least useful for learning English. However, Alkhunaizan (2019) results about students' perspectives on this app proved that although at the beginner-level participants were not aware of the usage of WhatsApp as an EFL tool, once the teacher instructed them the answer was positive, as most of them started to regard WhatsApp as a useful instrument that should be

implemented in the classroom. Unlike the study of Alkhunaizan (2019), in the present study, the students received no specific instructions on how to use apps to the benefit of EFL learning. As a result, they were not capable of perceiving the applications' possible contributions to their learning process.

Besides, Almekhlafy & Ali's (2016) investigation demonstrated that WhatsApp was beneficial for communicating with native speakers; therefore, enhancing pupils' speaking skills. In the present study, the majority of the participants believed that the use of social media was a good way for students to communicate with native speakers, with no negative answers provided by the participants. Additionally, the finding from the questionnaire was in line with the study by Arif (2019), who found that the social media most frequently used by learners nowadays is Instagram.

The lack of anxiety in the EFL classroom as a result of using MALL seems a relevant matter for the participants of this study. Other studies confirm that students feel more comfortable when discussing lessons through the class forum instead of doing it in class (Zou & Li, 2015), or using Facebook discussion boards (Hatane & Wijaya, 2010), as they felt more comfortable in a virtual environment than in a face-to-face class, understanding better the written discussions than oral debates. The reduction of language learning-related anxiety seems thus a strong point in favor of a more widespread implementation of MALL in regular EFL courses.

Moreover, students considered both mobile phone applications and social media may be beneficial for their process of mastering a foreign language, displaying willingness towards the practice of English through MALL rather than the traditional type of homework. Additionally, they were positive about implementing MALL as a part of their regular EFL courses, similarly to Rosell-Aguilar's (2018) study.

Regarding the role of the teachers, participants were neutral about teachers' readiness and preparedness to implement MALL on a regular basis in their EFL courses. However, the majority of the students believed that teachers should encourage students to make more use of mobile applications for English learning, in line with Attewell *et al.*'s (2009) findings.

Finally, students were neutral as far as the digital knowledge of their teachers was concerned, which points at the need of giving more attention to training teachers to be

skilled and confident enough to implement MALL in their courses, as the students claim in favor of apps' inclusion in their EFL learning.

## **6. Conclusion and pedagogical implications**

As acknowledged by Prensky (2001) the need for new strategies for teaching *Digital Natives* is undeniable. Besides, nowadays most of the students rely merely on mobile phone applications (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018) regarding them as the unique source of knowledge (Hidayati & Diana, 2019). In this way, previous research has already acknowledged the positive disposition of EFL learners towards mobile phone devices employed for educational purposes. The present study provides additional evidence with respect to university students' perspectives about the use of MALL through smartphone applications as well as social media in the field of EFL learning. Whilst this study did not confirm that students utilize mobile phone applications for learning English very often (as they preferred social media), it did partially substantiate the idea that learners consider its implementation in the classroom to be beneficial. Overall, students acknowledged that it may aid them to improve their English skills such as reading, writing, speaking and grammar. They regarded the use of MALL as adding a fun factor to the process of EFL learning, which makes it less boring, and helpful to communicate with native speakers and to reduce classroom anxiety.

However, although students displayed a positive attitude towards MALL's incorporation, some teachers still feel reluctant to utilize mobile phone devices when teaching English. The findings of this study as well as the previous research may help to encourage the teachers to incorporate the use of mobile phone devices and apps in their classrooms. Additionally, it is worth taking into account that the participants of this study are not only *Digital Natives*, but probably also future teachers who will certainly include MALL in their classrooms.

In order to help digitally reticent teachers to move forward towards the future mainstream incorporation of MALL in EFL classrooms, several pedagogical suggestions may be proposed. Firstly, according to Attewell *et al.* (2009) teachers need to be instructed on how to prepare educationally valuable materials for students to learn not only how to use a software, but actually acquire knowledge. Secondly, teachers need to encourage undergraduates to utilize MALL applications and social media for learning purposes

(Hidayati & Diana, 2019). Finally, instructors need to take into account that not every student may possess a smartphone –as in the case of Andriani & Bansa’s (2014) study, where students did not possess microphones– so that they need to seek for alternative resources and materials, or pair or group work. There are as well technical concerns, such as the one mentioned by the participants of the present study, regarding the connectivity problems that may be faced when utilizing MALL. Any future incorporations of MALL in mainstream education should take these issues into account, so that solutions to any problems are provided and any possible digital divide is detected and prevented or at least lessened.

To conclude, the present study presents some limitations due to the small number of participants as it was focused in a quite specific context. Therefore, further research needs to be performed in the following years in order to observe the development of the utilization of MALL at the university level.



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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

Please mark your age rank and year of English studies.

Age range: 17-19 / 20-22/ 22<

English course: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4

1. How often do you use smartphone applications for learning/improving your English?  
never - very occasionally - a few times a month - a few times a week - almost every day

2. Which applications for studying English have you used? (The last 3 years or while studying in university)

Duolingo - BBC learning English - Memrise - Livemocha - (other(s), please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Which of them have you used most often?

Duolingo - BBC Learning English - Memrise - (other(s), please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What have you used them for, more specifically?

To improve: my writing skills /my reading skills/ my listening skills/my speaking skills/none/other(s) \_\_\_\_\_

5. How useful do you consider the following mobile phone applications for improving/learning English?: (1= not useful, 2= slightly useful, 3= moderately useful, 4= useful, 5= very useful)

Duolingo 1 2 3 4 5

BBC Learning 1 2 3 4 5

Memrise 1 2 3 4 5

(Other, please specify) \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

6. How much time do you spend using apps for learning/ improving your English? (Weekly)

Less than 1 hour 1-2 hours 2-3 hours 3-4 hours 5 hours or more

7. How frequently do you use online dictionaries? (Weekly)

never - very occasionally (1-2 days) - a few times a week (3-4 days) - almost every day

8. Do you use online dictionaries more often on your computer or on your mobile phone?

Always on my computer - mostly on my computer - on both - mostly on my mobile phone - always on my mobile phone- other \_\_\_\_\_

9. What do you use the dictionary for?

check the meaning of the word - check English definition - look for synonyms/antonyms - check the pronunciation- other(s) \_\_\_\_\_

10. How much you (dis)agree with the following statement?: I would be willing to spend time practicing with mobile phone apps additionally to the classroom work, instead of the traditional homework. (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 =neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree). 1 2 3 4 5

11. How often do you use social media for learning/improving your English? (weekly)

never - very occasionally (1-2 days) - a few times a week (3-4 days) - almost every day

12. Which social media do you use the most for improving/learning English?

(1=never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=always)

Instagram 1 2 3 4 5

Facebook 1 2 3 4 5  
WhatsApp 1 2 3 4 5  
other \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

13. How useful do you think social media are for English learning?  
(1=not useful, 2= slightly useful, 3= moderately useful, 4=useful, 5=very useful)

Instagram 1 2 3 4 5  
Facebook 1 2 3 4 5  
WhatsApp 1 2 3 4 5  
other \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

14. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: The use of social media for learning purposes is a good way for students to communicate with Native English speakers. (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 =neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree).  
1 2 3 4

5

15. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: I consider learning English through social media presents more problems than advantages. (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 =neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree).  
1 2 3 4

5

16. Rate the following advantages of using smartphone applications for English learning.  
(1=not relevant, 2= slightly relevant, 3= Moderately relevant, 4= relevant, 5=very relevant)

No location restriction 1 2 3 4 5  
No time limit 1 2 3 4 5  
Lack of classroom anxiety 1 2 3 4 5  
Limitless amount of access 1 2 3 4 5  
Other(s) \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5

17. Name at least one disadvantage of using smartphone applications in English learning courses. \_\_\_\_\_

18. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: The use of smartphone applications in English courses is a good way for instructors and students to communicate. (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 =neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree).  
1 2 3 4

5

19. How much you (dis)agree with the following statement?: The use of the mobile phone for learning purposes improves: (You can choose more than one)  
my writing skills /my reading skills/ my listening skills/my speaking skills/none

20. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: The use of smartphone applications in an English learning classroom can be more fun. (1=strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3 =neither agree nor disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree).  
1 2 3 4

5

21. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: Mobile-assisted language learning is less boring than traditional learning.  
1 2 3 4

5

22. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: English language teachers are willing to implement mobile learning in their courses. 1 2 3 4 5

23. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: I consider that teachers have enough knowledge and skills to use mobile applications for teaching English. 1 2 3 4 5

24. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: I think teachers should encourage students to make more use of mobile applications for English learning. 1 2 3 4 5

25. How much do you (dis)agree with the following statement?: I consider mobile applications for language learning should be included as an integral part of regular courses. 1 2 3 4 5

26. In what way can mobile apps be useful for learning English? Choose from the options below and/or give your own reason(s):  
To improve:  
my writing skills /my reading skills/ my listening skills/my speaking skills/others \_\_\_\_\_

27. Why can mobile apps be useful for learning English? Choose from the options below and/or give your own reason(s):  
More motivating - No location restriction – More fun - No time limit – More interesting - Lack of classroom anxiety - Limitless amount of access – Less boring - (Other, please specify)  
\_\_\_\_\_

28. In what way can social media be useful for learning English? Choose from the options below and/or give your own reason(s):  
More motivating - No location restriction – More fun - No time limit – More interesting - Lack of classroom anxiety - Limitless amount of access – Less boring - (Other, please specify)  
\_\_\_\_\_

29. Feel free to add any comment on the topic here:  
.....  
.....  
.....

THANK YOU FOR FILLING IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE