

LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY THROUGH MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (MALL): STUDENTS' VOICES

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning is a fundamental component of language mastery, as it underpins students' ability to communicate effectively and comprehend texts. With the rapid advancement of technology, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as an innovative approach that enables flexible, accessible, and interactive learning experiences. However, despite its potential benefits, many university students still face challenges in expanding their English vocabulary due to limited study time, low motivation, and the lack of engaging learning resources. This study aims to explore university students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through MALL. Employing a qualitative exploratory design, ten students from the Management Study Program at one of the private universities in Indonesia who were enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course participated in the research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory observations, then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings revealed five main themes: (1) flexibility of time and place in learning, (2) increased motivation and engagement through gamified features, (3) independent learning strategies in vocabulary acquisition, (4) technical challenges and digital distractions, and (5) the need for support from lecturers and the academic environment. Students valued the flexibility and autonomy MALL offered, as well as the motivation gained from interactive and gamified elements. Nevertheless, issues such as unstable internet connections and distractions from social media often hindered learning consistency. The study concludes that MALL enhances flexibility, motivation, and learner autonomy in vocabulary learning, yet its effectiveness depends on students' self-discipline and institutional support. It underscores the essential role of lecturers in guiding and integrating MALL effectively into classroom instruction.

Keywords: *Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, vocabulary learning, student experiences, motivation, learner autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

Learning English vocabulary is one of the essential aspects of mastering a foreign language, as vocabulary serves as the foundation for the four language skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, many learners continue to face difficulties in expanding their vocabulary due to limited time, low motivation, and insufficient access to engaging learning resources (Silitonga et al., 2024). Along with the advancement of technology, language learning is no longer confined to traditional classrooms but can now be conducted through digital devices such as smartphones. One of the rapidly growing approaches is Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which refers to language learning supported by mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets (Yang, 2025). Through MALL, learners can study anytime and anywhere while accessing a variety of applications and interactive media that enhance learning engagement. Hence, MALL provides great opportunities to create more flexible, personalized, and enjoyable learning experiences. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this approach needs to be evaluated based on students' experiences and perceptions as the primary users of this technology.

In the context of English language education in Indonesia, the use of MALL has become increasingly relevant due to the widespread ownership of mobile devices among students and the growing availability of internet connectivity. Language learning applications such as *Duolingo*, *Quizlet*, and *Memrise* have been widely utilized to help learners study vocabulary independently (Mujiarni et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of these applications depends on factors such as learners' motivation, digital literacy, and support from their academic environment (Kartal, 2024). Therefore, it is essential to understand how students themselves perceive their experiences in learning English vocabulary through MALL. Students' voices can provide valuable insights into the advantages, challenges, and needs they encounter while using this technology. This study aims to explore these experiences in depth to enrich the understanding of MALL implementation in English language learning. By understanding students' perspectives, educators can

design more effective and technology-based learning strategies that align with the needs of the digital generation.

This study holds significant importance as it responds to the demand for modern, flexible, and student-centered language learning approaches that suit the learning styles of today's digital generation. Although many Indonesian students have access to mobile devices, not all are able to utilize them effectively for academic purposes, particularly for vocabulary learning. Moreover, despite the abundance of mobile learning applications, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding regarding how students actually experience learning through MALL whether they find it helpful, motivating, or challenging (Zhou and Goh, 2025). Therefore, this research is essential to capture students' voices in order to comprehend their perceptions, experiences, and needs in using mobile technology for language learning. The findings of this study are expected to help educators design more contextual and student-oriented teaching approaches. Furthermore, the study may serve as a reference for educational technology developers to create more relevant and supportive features for effective vocabulary learning. Thus, this research contributes not only to the theoretical development of technology-enhanced language learning but also to classroom practices that are more interactive and learner-centered.

Previous studies have demonstrated that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has great potential in enhancing language skills, particularly vocabulary acquisition. For instance, Sabani et al. (2025) emphasized that the use of mobile devices can extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom and increase students' engagement in language learning. Similarly, Zhou and Goh (2025) found that mobile-based learning applications facilitate autonomous learning and strengthen vocabulary retention through interactive practice. However, most of these studies were conducted in developed countries with stable technological infrastructure, which may not fully represent the experiences of students in developing countries such as Indonesia. In addition, many of the previous studies have focused on measuring learning outcomes quantitatively rather than exploring learners' subjective experiences and perceptions (Kartal, 2024). This

creates a research gap in understanding how Indonesian students actually experience vocabulary learning through MALL, including factors such as motivation, technical constraints, and individual learning strategies.

To fill this gap, the present study aims to explore in depth students' experiences in using mobile devices to learn English vocabulary. The focus is not merely on learning outcomes but on students' voices that is, their perceptions, attitudes, and reflections toward the use of MALL in their learning process. This approach is significant as it provides a more humanistic and contextual understanding rather than relying solely on numerical results. Using a qualitative design, this research collects data through interviews and observations of students who actively use mobile-based language learning applications. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies learning experience patterns that provide new insights into English language education in Indonesia. Thus, this research not only strengthens theoretical perspectives on MALL but also offers practical implications for teachers and educational institutions in designing more effective, relevant, and learner-centred vocabulary learning strategies.

The main objective of this study is to explore students' experiences and perceptions in learning English vocabulary through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Specifically, it focuses on how students utilize mobile devices and language learning applications to expand their vocabulary, as well as the factors that influence the effectiveness of this learning approach. In addition, the study aims to identify the benefits and challenges that students encounter throughout the mobile-based learning process. By understanding students' real experiences, this research provides a comprehensive picture of how MALL can enhance motivation, engagement, and vocabulary learning outcomes. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for educators and application developers in designing adaptive and contextually relevant learning strategies and tools. More broadly, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on mobile technology integration in English language learning within the Indonesian educational context. Consequently, the results of this study are expected to support the development of

more effective and innovative language learning practices aligned with the demands of the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Vocabulary Development

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has revolutionized language education by extending learning beyond the physical classroom and integrating technological tools into everyday language practice. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) define MALL as a subfield of computer-assisted language learning that leverages mobile technology to facilitate flexibility, immediacy, and accessibility in learning. Through mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, learners can engage with multimedia materials that support multiple learning modalities, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, making vocabulary learning more engaging and effective. Sabani et al. (2025) emphasizes that MALL provides learners with opportunities for continuous exposure to language input, repetition, and contextualized practice, all of which are essential for vocabulary retention. In this sense, MALL transforms passive learning into an active and interactive process, encouraging students to take part in authentic language use.

Numerous studies have supported the role of MALL in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and learner motivation. Zhou and Goh (2025) found that mobile applications enable personalized learning experiences by allowing users to select topics, track progress, and receive instant feedback. Similarly, (Kartal, 2024) highlighted that MALL fosters learner engagement through gamified features, adaptive exercises, and social interaction. Applications such as *Duolingo*, *Quizlet*, and *Memrise* exemplify how mobile learning promotes self-paced learning and sustained vocabulary practice. However, most existing studies focus on quantitative outcomes such as test scores or frequency of use, leaving a gap in understanding students' subjective experiences and emotional engagement in MALL-based learning. In developing countries like Indonesia, where access to technology and digital literacy vary significantly, it is crucial to explore how students actually perceive, experience, and adapt to vocabulary learning through mobile platforms.

Students' Experiences and Learner Autonomy in Technology-Based Language Learning

Understanding students' experiences in technology-based learning environments is central to determining the effectiveness of MALL. Learner autonomy, as proposed by Holec (1981), refers to the ability of learners to take control of their own learning process, including setting goals, choosing methods, and evaluating progress. MALL naturally supports this autonomy by allowing learners to decide when, where, and how they learn vocabulary. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) argue that mobile learning promotes self-directed learning by providing learners with continuous access to language resources and real-time feedback. Furthermore, the portability of mobile devices encourages incidental learning, in which students acquire new vocabulary in informal contexts outside the classroom. This flexibility aligns with constructivist principles, where learning is viewed as an active process of constructing knowledge through experience and interaction.

Recent research has also shown that learner autonomy and motivation are closely intertwined in mobile learning environments. (Prasongko et al., 2025) found that mobile applications that incorporate interactive and social elements foster higher engagement and motivation among learners. Similarly, Wahyudi et al. (2025) emphasized that MALL enhances self-regulated learning when students actively plan, monitor, and reflect on their progress. However, despite these advantages, learners often face barriers such as digital distractions, inconsistent motivation, and limited pedagogical support. These challenges are particularly evident in the Indonesian higher education context, where students' access to stable internet connections and proper technological guidance remains uneven (Rachmawati and Purwati, 2022). Consequently, exploring students' voices provides valuable insight into their attitudes, challenges, and strategies in using MALL for vocabulary learning. Such an understanding is essential for developing learner-centred, context-sensitive pedagogical models that optimize the benefits of technology in English language education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory descriptive study design, aiming for an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore the subjective views, perceptions, and experiences of students within the authentic context of learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation to enable the researcher to obtain a rich and profound understanding of how students utilize mobile devices for vocabulary acquisition. The research participants consisted of 10 students from the Management Study Program at one of the private universities in Indonesia, who were enrolled in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course and actively used mobile-based language learning applications such as Duolingo, Quizlet, or Memrise. Participant selection was carried out using a criterion-based selection method, considering the relevance of participant characteristics to the research focus. The research setting was one of the private universities in Indonesia, encompassing both face-to-face classroom activities and online activities that involved the use of mobile devices. Through this design and research context, the researcher endeavours to present an authentic depiction of how students experience and interpret English vocabulary learning via MALL.

The data in this study comprised both primary and secondary sources, collected to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in learning English vocabulary through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Primary data were acquired directly from the participants through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation, aiming to explore the students' views, feelings, motivations, and the challenges they face when using mobile devices for vocabulary learning. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from students' reflective journals, documentation of learning activities, and relevant literature and findings from previous research on MALL and English vocabulary instruction. These diverse data sources were utilized for triangulation to enhance the validity and credibility of the research findings. All data were collected over one academic

semester of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course and were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis to identify patterns in the students' learning experiences. Through this combination of primary and secondary data, the research is expected to generate a comprehensive picture of how students utilize mobile technology to improve their English vocabulary mastery.

The data collection techniques in this study were semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. The semi-structured interviews were employed to allow participants the freedom to express their views and experiences while remaining focused on the research objectives. The instrument used was an interview guide containing open-ended questions concerning their vocabulary learning experiences with MALL, their motivation for using mobile applications, and their perceptions of the applications' effectiveness. Additionally, an observation sheet was used to record students' activities while interacting with English language learning applications, such as their frequency of use, the types of learning activities performed, and their response to application features.

The research procedure commenced with the planning stage, which involved determining the research objectives and participants, developing the instruments, and preparing the data collection schedule. The subsequent stage was the data collection execution, where the researcher conducted interviews and observations directly during the learning process over the course of one academic semester. After the data were collected, the researcher moved to the data analysis stage, using a thematic analysis approach. This approach involved the following steps: repeatedly reading all data to understand the context, coding the emergent main themes, grouping the data based on categories of meaning, and descriptively interpreting the results. Through this process, the researcher was able to identify patterns in students' learning experiences, the supporting and inhibiting factors, and the pedagogical implications of using MALL in English vocabulary learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on interviews and observations of ten students from the Management Study Program who took the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, five main

themes were identified that describe their experiences in learning English vocabulary through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). These themes include: (1) flexibility of time and place in learning, (2) increased motivation and learning engagement, (3) independent strategies for expanding vocabulary, (4) technical challenges and digital distractions, and (5) the need for support from lecturers and the learning environment.

Flexibility of Time and Place in Learning

Students felt that MALL provided them with the freedom to learn anywhere and anytime without depending on scheduled class meetings. The data can be illustrated in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 1:

“I can learn vocabulary while waiting for my friends in the cafeteria. So, I don’t have to be in class.” (S2)

Excerpt 2:

“At night before bed, I usually play Duolingo for 10 minutes to review new words.” (S5)

Excerpt 3:

“The good thing about the app is that it can be opened anytime. When the signal on campus is good, I start practicing right away.” (S1)

Excerpt 4:

“I don’t need to carry heavy books; just my phone is enough to study anywhere.” (S9)

The researcher noted that several students opened the Quizlet app during class breaks while listening to word pronunciation audios. This activity indicated that they utilized spare time for flexible vocabulary learning.

The data above show that students experienced temporal and spatial freedom in learning using MALL applications. They could learn spontaneously during daily routines without waiting for formal classroom sessions. This indicates a shift from traditional classroom learning toward a more flexible and contextual learning paradigm. Students also perceived mobile devices as practical, efficient,

and readily available learning tools, making learning a natural part of their daily routines.

Increased Motivation and Learning Engagement

Interactive features in learning applications, such as points, games, and level systems, made students more enthusiastic about learning vocabulary. The data can be seen in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 5:

“When I earn a lot of points, I feel happy, it’s like playing a game but I’m learning new words.” (S3)

Excerpt 6:

“The app notifies me if I study every day, so I’m motivated to keep my streak.” (S8)

Excerpt 7:

“I like the sounds and pictures, it’s more interesting than plain memorization.” (S6)

Excerpt 8:

“When I make a mistake, the app immediately corrects it and gives examples, so I understand quickly.” (S10)

Some students were observed enthusiastically sharing their scores or levels with classmates, creating a sense of positive competition. The data show that gamification elements and instant feedback in applications foster intrinsic motivation. Features such as points, levels, and daily reminders create a sense of achievement and emotional engagement in learning. Additionally, the combination of visual and audio elements makes learning more enjoyable and aids vocabulary retention. Thus, MALL serves not only as a learning tool but also as a medium that nurtures joy and continuous learning commitment.

Independent Strategies for Expanding Vocabulary

Students developed their own ways of using app features to deepen their vocabulary according to personal needs. The data can be shown in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 9:

“I like creating my own vocabulary sets on Quizlet, for example about business or economics.” (S7)

Excerpt 10:

“When I find a new word in lecture readings, I add it to the app so I can review it later.” (S4)

Excerpt 11:

“I use the audio feature to practice pronunciation so I don’t make mistakes during presentations.” (S2)

Excerpt 12:

“I prefer studying a little but regularly, so my daily goal is to learn five new words.” (S9)

Observation notes revealed that several students adjusted their vocabulary topics to management and economics, indicating autonomous learning aligned with their academic context. The statements above show that students actively used MALL applications to develop independent learning strategies. They selected vocabulary relevant to their field of study, utilized technological features to improve pronunciation, and set personal learning goals. This demonstrates a shift from passive learning to autonomous learning, where students can manage their own pace, materials, and methods of study.

Technical Challenges and Digital Distractions

Although MALL was perceived as helpful, students faced several technical difficulties such as unstable internet connections, device limitations, and distractions from social media. The data can be illustration in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 13:

“When the signal is weak, the app is hard to open. Sometimes I lose motivation.” (S1)

Excerpt 14:

“My phone often freezes because the app is heavy, so I uninstall and reinstall it.” (S5)

Excerpt 15:

“WhatsApp notifications often distract me, so I end up chatting instead of studying.” (S8)

Excerpt 16:

“If there’s no assignment, I forget to open the app. I need reminders to stay consistent.” (S6)

During the last few weeks of the semester, the researcher observed a decline in app usage among some students, especially when academic schedules became busier. The data reveal that the effectiveness of MALL is significantly influenced by technical factors and students’ self-discipline. Problems such as unstable internet connections, limited device capacity, and distractions from social media pose major obstacles. Additionally, a lack of external motivation results in inconsistent learning habits. Therefore, MALL’s success depends not only on technology but also on users’ readiness and self-management skills.

The Need for Support from Lecturers and Learning Environment

Students felt the need for encouragement and guidance from lecturers to make MALL usage more structured and consistent.

Excerpt 17:

“When the lecturer gives assignments through the app, I’m more motivated to open and study it.” (S3)

Excerpt 18:

“When my friends also use the app, I feel encouraged to join them.” (S7)

Excerpt 19:

“I want the lecturer to recommend which app is best for vocabulary practice.” (S10)

Excerpt 20

“If I don’t get feedback from the lecturer, I sometimes feel unsure whether I’m doing it right.” (S4)

The researcher observed that students who received direct guidance from lecturers on how to use the application were more active and consistent compared to those who learned independently.

Overall, these five themes indicate that vocabulary learning through MALL provides flexibility, enhances motivation, and promotes learner autonomy, yet it still requires technical and pedagogical support to be fully effective. This suggests that although MALL facilitates self-directed learning, the role of lecturers and social environments remains crucial in maintaining learning consistency and direction (Rachmawati and Purwati, 2021). Support in the form of guided tasks, feedback, and peer interaction fosters responsibility and engagement. Thus, the success of MALL depends on the synergy between technology, pedagogy, and the learning community.

The research findings indicate that students highly value the flexibility of time and place afforded by MALL. This discovery aligns with Holec's (1981) theory of learner autonomy, which posits that learners given control over their time and method of study tend to take greater responsibility for their own progress (Kartal, 2024). In this context, MALL offers students the latitude to adjust the learning process to their daily routines without formal pressure. Research by Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) also demonstrated that flexibility is a primary advantage of MALL in supporting modern language learning. Therefore, the flexibility perceived by students is not merely a practical benefit but also supports the development of learner independence, which is a key goal of technology-based language instruction.

A second key finding highlights how gamification features, such as points, levels, and instant feedback, significantly boost students' learning motivation. This can be explained by the Self-Determination Theory (Ahmad, 2012), which emphasizes the importance of *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness* in fostering intrinsic motivation. When students feel competent through the achievement of points and levels, they are more encouraged to continue learning. This result is consistent with Li et al. (2025) research, which found that interactive elements in MALL applications strengthen learner engagement and cultivate continuous learning habits. Thus, the motivation derived from gaming elements is not just temporary enjoyment but an effective strategy for maintaining a consistent study routine.

Students in this study also demonstrated the ability to regulate their self-directed learning strategies, such as creating their own vocabulary lists and setting daily learning targets. This finding reinforces the constructivist learning approach, where learners build knowledge based on their own experiences and context (Vygotsky, 1978). Through MALL, students are not only consuming materials but are also actively constructing new knowledge relevant to their academic needs. This result is consistent with research by Zhou and Goh (2025), which found that MALL encourages learners to become both the designers and agents of their language learning process. Consequently, MALL serves as a bridge between formal and informal learning that expands students' self-directed learning experience.

While MALL offers numerous benefits, technical barriers such as internet connectivity, device limitations, and digital distraction remain major constraints. This aligns with (Liu et al., 2024) finding that the successful implementation of MALL is highly dependent on technological readiness and infrastructure support. In the Indonesian context, where internet connectivity in some regions is still limited, this challenge is particularly salient for mobile learners (Rachmawati and Purwati, 2022). Furthermore, issues of self-discipline and distraction from other applications indicate that digital literacy is also a crucial factor that must be developed alongside language proficiency. Therefore, institutional support and increased awareness of productive technology use are pressing needs.

The research findings also affirm the vital role of lecturers and the social environment in the success of MALL. Students reported feeling more motivated when lecturers provided guidance, feedback, and tasks that were integrated with the applications. This supports the perspective of Warschauer and Healey (1998) within Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theory, which stresses the importance of the teacher's role as a facilitator in guiding technology use to ensure pedagogical objectives are met. Moreover, peer support fosters a collaborative learning environment that strengthens both accountability and motivation. Thus, effective MALL integration requires a balance between student autonomy and pedagogical guidance from the lecturer.

In the context of Indonesian students, this research demonstrates that MALL has significant potential to support more contextual and interactive vocabulary learning. However, its effectiveness is highly dependent on social and educational infrastructure factors. Consistent with the research findings of Zahraa et al. (2025), the use of mobile devices can enhance vocabulary learning outcomes if supported by focused instructional design and active lecturer participation. Therefore, the integration of MALL into the curriculum must consider technological readiness, students' learning culture, and institutional policy support to ensure its benefits are fully realized.

Overall, this study confirms that MALL provides a space for students to learn in a way that is flexible, autonomous, and highly motivated. However, the success of MALL implementation relies not only on technology but also on human factors such as motivation, self-discipline, and institutional support. These findings reinforce the literature stating that the successful integration of technology in language learning results from a synergy between pedagogical design, technological readiness, and the social role of the learner. For future research, it is recommended that the focus be broadened to the effectiveness of MALL use in various social contexts and different educational levels, and to further investigate how MALL integration can enhance productive skills such as speaking and writing in English.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that learning English vocabulary through Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) provides students with a positive learning experience, particularly concerning flexibility, motivation, and learner autonomy. Students can study at various places and times according to their needs, reflecting an increase in learning autonomy. Interactive features in applications such as Duolingo and Quizlet were found to enhance engagement and strengthen vocabulary retention through repetitive and enjoyable practice. Nevertheless, the study also identified challenges, including technical limitations, digital distraction, and a lack of self-discipline, which can impede learning effectiveness. Therefore,

the success of MALL is highly influenced by a combination of technological readiness, learner motivation, and institutional support. Overall, MALL can be an effective vocabulary learning strategy when integrated with a planned and contextualized pedagogical approach.

The findings of this research have several important implications for the field of education, particularly for English language instruction in higher education. First, the findings regarding flexibility and motivation suggest that MALL can be utilized to strengthen learning outside the formal classroom, necessitating that lecturers encourage technology-based self-directed learning. Second, given the significant role of motivation and self-discipline in the successful use of MALL, educational institutions need to provide digital literacy training to enable students to use technology productively. Third, this research makes a theoretical contribution by reinforcing the view that MALL is not merely a learning aid but also a medium that shapes new, more autonomous and interactive learning behaviors. Additionally, for language application developers, these results can serve as a basis for designing features that are more adaptive to the needs and context of Indonesian learners.

Based on the research findings and implications, several recommendations can be put forth. First, lecturers are advised to systematically integrate the use of MALL into the curriculum, for instance, through project-based tasks or digital portfolios that utilize vocabulary learning applications. Second, educational institutions need to strengthen digital infrastructure support such as internet access and learning devices to ensure optimal MALL implementation. Third, students should be provided with guidance on time management and self-motivation strategies so that learning through MALL can be conducted consistently. Fourth, further research is recommended to explore the use of MALL in enhancing other language skills such as speaking and writing, and to compare its effectiveness across different age groups and academic backgrounds. Through these steps, MALL has the potential to become a sustainable innovation that enriches the English language learning experience in the digital era.

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