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EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SELF-STUDY OF THE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL ON THE LANGUAGE LEARNING APPLICATION "CAKE"

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Abstract: This exploratory study investigated how English as a foreign language (EFL) students utilized the language learning Cake for English speaking practice and identified the specific features of the application that they found most beneficial. Data were collected from students' journals in five consecutive weeks and interviews with them. The findings reveal that the students conducted their self-study with Cake on their mobile phones or laptops, engaging in activities ranging from 15 minutes to two hours per session. In their learning, the students primarily used Cake to practice listening and speaking through video-based lessons with subtitles, employing shadowing techniques and repetition until achieving more accurate pronunciation through the application's real-time feedback system. They also completed quizzes to reinforce learning. The students found the application's realistic conversational videos, review features, and lessons on everyday topics like fashion, environment, and education particularly beneficial for their English speaking learning. The study suggests that Cake effectively facilitates self-directed English speaking practice by providing accessible, engaging content and immediate feedback, empowering learners to improve their pronunciation, listening comprehension, and overall communicative competence. This research provides evidence-based insights for educators and learners seeking to integrate MALL applications like Cake into language learning contexts.

Keywords: Cake application, mobile-assisted language learning, English speaking skill

1. Introduction

The proliferation of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications has transformed the landscape of language education, offering learners unprecedented flexibility and access to resources outside traditional classroom settings (Wardak, 2020). Among these applications, Cake presents itself as a promising tool for English language learners, particularly

in enhancing speaking skills. While the literature highlights the potential benefits of MALL in general, including improved vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (D'mello & Graesser, 2013; Ikha'a, 2023), there is a need for focused research on the specific impact of individual applications like Cake on language proficiency. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the Cake application in facilitating English speaking skills among university students in Vietnam, focusing on their self-study learning experiences. It addresses the following research questions:

1. How do EFL university students use the Cake application for self-study of the English speaking skill?

2. What specific features of the Cake application do students find most beneficial for learning the English speaking skill?

This study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the pedagogical value of MALL applications like Cake and provide insights into effective strategies for integrating such tools into self-directed language learning contexts. By addressing these research questions, the study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for educators and learners seeking to leverage mobile technology for enhanced language acquisition.

2. Literature review

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL)

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has emerged as a significant innovation in language education, driven by the digital shift (Wardak, 2020). The portability and connectivity of smartphones enable learners to engage in asynchronous, anytime language learning, particularly outside the traditional classroom (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012). This offers opportunities for self-study, real-world application, and efficient use of free time. While the potential benefits of MALL for EFL learners are evident, with readily available applications for improving speaking skills, further research is needed to fully understand the impact of these tools on language acquisition.

Mobile devices offer a wide array of learning possibilities, including quick feedback, immersive experiences, situated learning, and collaborative learning (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2004). They serve as mediating tools, fostering interaction between learners, teachers, and content. Kukulska-Hulme (2006) predicted the potential of mobile devices for informal language learning, aligning with the characteristics of mobile learning: permanency, accessibility, immediacy, interactivity, and situated instruction (Ogata & Yano, 2005). However, empirical studies are crucial to validate these predictions and explore how these features translate into measurable improvements in language proficiency.

While MALL offers opportunities for practice and cognitive development, concerns exist regarding over-reliance on automated feedback and audiovisuals, potentially hindering critical thinking and the development of core language skills (D'mello & Graesser, 2013; Ikha'a, 2023). Therefore, research should investigate the effectiveness of different MALL applications in improving specific language skills (e.g. reading, speaking, listening) to gain a deeper understanding of how MALL in general and a language learning application in particular can effectively contribute to language education and develop evidence-based strategies for its implementation.

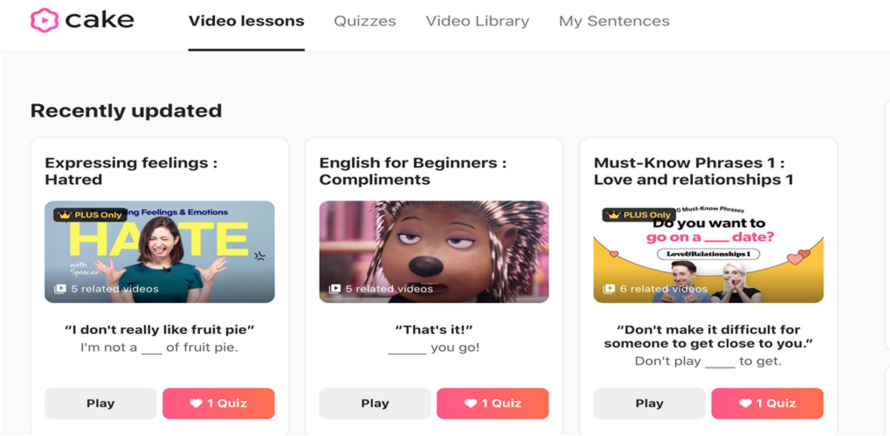
Cake: The English language learning application

The emergence of MALL is associated with the production of abudant language learning applications to meet the learners' demand of self-study. Cake is one of the most recent mobile apps for English learning in 2018.

Figure 1: Cake English Learning Application

Cake is a popular English learning application, particularly in South Korea, that focuses on improving speaking skills (Yanthi, 2021). It offers daily updated contents, including videos, brief dialogues, and discussions, facilitating continuous learning (Fitria et al., 2021). Available for free download on the Google Play Store, Cake features a user-friendly interface with Home, Search, Speak, Library, and Profile menus. Users can access diverse content categories, such as movies, travel, and TV shows, through the Search function and begin learning by watching subtitled videos. The application also includes a notification system and options for today' s content and subscriptions.

Figure 2: Cake interface



Cake uses YouTube videos and subscribed channels to enhance speaking skills. Users practice by listening to conversations, imitating the speakers, recording their voice, and comparing it to the original for immediate feedback. This process resembles a classroom setting where learners listen to a dialogue before speaking. Besides, the Cake application provides a variety of activities, including pronunciation exercises, sentence construction, and repeating after videos, catering to different stages of speaking. It allows learners to set study goals and track their progress. The application is rich in English expressions, words, and idioms presented through short videos and audio.

Momeni (2022) highlights Cake as a promising platform for learning English through engaging and realistic videos. The application focuses on improving speaking and listening skills by presenting situation-specific language. It can also serve as a supplementary resource for English language teachers. Similarly, Ali (2023) suggests using Cake as supplementary material for speech classes. The application encourages enjoyable learning and provides immediate feedback, reducing speaking anxiety. It also supports vocabulary acquisition through dialogues. Cake is found to promote fun learning, improving student motivation, confidence, and comfort in speaking (Yanthi, 2020).

Previous studies

The research on the Cake application highlights several key themes related to language learning. Primarily, studies consistently demonstrate its effectiveness in **enhancing vocabulary acquisition and learning motivation**, as shown by Putri et al. (2023), who found it to be a valuable tool for classroom integration. Secondly, a significant focus lies on **improving English speaking skills**. Chaniago (2022) provided quantitative evidence of Cake's positive impact on speaking abilities, while Hamdani and Puspitorini (2022) explored students' perceptions, revealing that Cake promotes independent practice, boosts confidence, and increases

motivation. Other studies address the **implementation of Cake in educational settings**, with Octavianita et al. (2022) examining its use in online classrooms. Overall, the research points to Cake as a versatile tool that positively influences various aspects of language learning, from vocabulary and motivation to speaking proficiency and classroom application.

The reviewed studies on the Cake application reveal several gaps. Primarily, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of specific language skills, particularly regarding improvements in speaking and the precise nature of English pronunciation. While implementation is addressed, there is a need for more research to supplement qualitative student perception and actual use Cake for language self-study. Detailed analyses of specific Cake features, such as speech recognition, and a focus on student perspectives are also missing.

3. Methodology

Research design

This study utilized a qualitative design, gathering data through students' learning journals and interviews during a semester at a university in the central area of Vietnam. Five EFL students, engaged in self-study of speaking skills on their own schedules, participated. They maintained weekly learning journals, each contributing five journals over five consecutive weeks, resulting in 25 journals for analysis. Interviews were conducted after the five-week period, following the students' journal reflections.

Participants

The recruitment of the five participants in the current study was considered sufficient to identify key themes and patterns relevant to the research questions because they shared similar characteristics of being English majors in the same language education program and experiences of self-study the speaking skill via the application Cake. These features were relevant to the study's focus, aiming for data saturation where new interviews yield little to no new information. This approach also prioritizes the quality and depth of the information gathered over the quantity of participants.

The participants (pseudonames: Alice, Diana, Lena, Oliver, and Phoebe) were second-year university students in Vietnam, aged 19-20, majoring in English language teaching, linguistics, translation, and interpretation. They were introduced to the Cake English learning application and invited to participate. Upon consent, they were instructed on how to maintain learning journals while using Cake for self-study over five weeks. Table 1 below provides the participants' profile:

Table 1: Participants' profile

Pseudo-names	Gender	Age	Major	Time to use Cake for self-study each session
Alice	Female	19	English language teaching	40 minutes or more
Diana	Female	20	English linguistics	15 minutes or more
Lena	Female	19	Translation	about 1 to 2 hours
Oliver	Female	19	Interpretation	about 1 hour
Phoebe	Female	20	English linguistics	15 minutes or more

Data collection tools

The study employed journal and interview for data collection. The journal included guiding questions about their Cake learning experiences, time spent on the application, and helpful features of the tool. Each participant's five journals were coded (e.g., Lena J2 for Lena's second journal). The interview explored how students learned with Cake, the application role in self-study, and changes in their self-study skills. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes, were transcribed in Vietnamese, translated into English, and verified by participants. Interviews were coded (e.g., Lena-I for Lena's interview).

Data analysis

Data was analyzed thematically. Journal entries and interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify emerging themes and subthemes related to app features that facilitated language skill development. The coding scheme was adapted from Le and Bui (2024).The two sources of data were then triangluated in interpretation for deeper understanding of the students' experiences with the self-study on the application Cake.

Table 2: Coding Scheme: Application Features (Adpated from Le and Bui, 2024)

Coding theme	Explanations	Examples from the current study's journal and interview data
Presentational schemes (Hubbard, 1996, 2006)	The way in which an activity type is presented to the user, including such elements as interface, timing, control options, and help options	**The tool bar of Cake provides easy to search for lessons by topic (Lena, J1)**

Activity types (Hubbard, 1996, 2006)	Activity types of an online application including game, quiz, text reconstruction, text construction and problem solving	From the videos, app Cake creates quizzes, questions for listening and answering, and it requires me to record my voice. As a result, I can enhance my pronunciation and vocabulary. (Alice, J2)
Providing personalized learning (Lee & Xiong, 2023; Li et al., 2022)	Gearing toward students' learning needs and enabling users to increase their personal learning experiences according to their different learning styles, content and needs	Cake application helps my self-study skills become more proactive, the application often reminds me of the lesson of the day, helps me always review knowledge and actively enthusiastically learn new knowledge from the lessons suggested every day of the application. From there, it helps me completely master my self-study time anytime, anywhere. (Diana, I)
Giving feedback and correcting errors (Murray, 2017)	Providing timely, multimodal, specific and personalized feedback and language results	For example, every sentence I said is recorded and played back by the application. It also points out pronunciation errors in words that I did not pronounce correctly so that I can practice speaking over and over again and say the sentences right. (Diana, J5)

3. Findings

EFL university students' self-study of the English speaking skill on Cake application

The five students Alice, Diana, Lena, Oliver, and Phoebe reported in the journals their self-study of English ranging from 15 minutes to two hours each time. They chose a mobile phone or a laptop to work on the Cake application. They usually watched the videos provided by the application by Cake with or without subtitles. They then repeated the sentences in shadowing technique which means repeating until the pronunciation is checked correct by the feedback system from Cake. They also reported doing the quizzes at the end of each lesson to consolidate their lessons. The lesson topics include fashion, environment, education and other common topics among students. For example, Lena wrote, "Today I did the self study with Cake about two hours on a smart phone to practice listening to common communication sentences in English. I followed some steps for examples: (1) listen without subtitles; (2) listen with subtitles; and (3) repeat the sentence patterns provided" (Lena, J1). In another journal, Lena wrote, "I had the opportunity to practice listening to common communication sentences of native speakers, easily applying to real situations today. There is a review section where I can review the parts you have learned" (Lena, J2).

Quite similar to the way Lena studied on the application Cake, Diana reported 15 minutes for her self-study. She mentioned in the journal, "Today, before practicing speaking any available dialogues or quizzes, I repeat after the application so that I can listen and practice speaking until I achieve the most satisfactory or accurate results" (Diana, J3).

Alice used a laptop to study with Cake for about 40 minutes each time where she learned many types of lessons, e.g. sample sentences for expressing emotions, describing fashion, something that she hated, etc. Oliver spent an hour each time to study with Cake on a laptop. She chose lectures on education, travel, sports and so on. She reflected in a journal, "In my self-study lesson today, the app helped me practice speaking English. It introduces specific situations that are close to everyday life, so it makes it easy to understand and learn skills while communicating" (Oliver, J5).

Like the other participants of this study, Phoebe appreciated her experience of self-study with Cake. She reported to spend about 15 minutes each time to study with the application on her laptop. Commenting on her learning process, she wrote in one journal, "In my self-study today, the app gives a short video and it is a very realistic conversation. There is a transcript below and I can listen and read it again to understand the context if I can't catch what they say. Then, I learn the sentences that are repeated 3 times in the video" (Phoebe, J4).

In general, the journal entries reveal diverse self-study approaches using the Cake application, with time periods ranging from 15 minutes to two hours per session and utilizing both mobile phones and laptops. Lena focused on listening comprehension and pattern repetition, dedicating the most time to her self-study. Diana prioritized pronunciation accuracy through repetition, while Alice utilized the app for vocabulary acquisition and sentence construction, particularly for expressing emotions. Oliver valued the applications' practical,

everyday scenarios for conversational practice, and Phoebe appreciated the inclusion of transcripts for enhanced comprehension and sentence learning. Overall, the students tailored their learning strategies to their individual needs and preferences, highlighting the Cake application's flexibility and focus on practical English skills.

Cake application's features enhancing EFL students' speaking skill

Presentational schemes

From the journal entries, it can be drawn that the Cake application's design and interface are frequently noted in the journal entries. Lena, for example, highlights the application's interface and controls, mentioning "The presentation was very quick," and appreciating the ability to "choose your favorite topic to practice listening" and "adjust the playback speed to 0.75x" (Lena, J3). She also points out the structured learning approach with listening in three steps and the repetition of content: "The main text content in the listening lesson is repeated three times." Phoebe also comments on a presentational aspect, noting, "I understand the context better because there are transcripts" (Phoebe, J1). These entries suggest that the application's layout, control options, and the inclusion of features like transcripts contribute to the learning experience.

In the interview, Diana highlights the accessibility and convenience afforded by mobile devices, noting that she can "learn vocabulary, grammar or practice English skills very easily" (Diana, I) using her smartphone. She also mentions the variety of learning materials available, such as "watching English movies, reading bilingual books online," and engaging with "short conversations on the Cake application." This suggests that the Cake application, accessible on mobile devices, offers a range of presentational formats to cater to different learning preferences.

Activity types

The journal entries also indicate that the students engaged with a variety of activities within the Cake application. Lena focuses on listening practice, stating, "I can choose your favorite topic to practice listening" and describing the "listen in 3 steps" approach. Diana's entries emphasize pronunciation practice, with her mentioning "recording speech and analyzing errors" and stating that she wants to "repeat it until the result is correct" (Diana, J5). Alice describes learning phrases and vocabulary, such as "I learned a lot of new words and expressions to express my feelings" and "I learned a lot of expressions in the fashion field" (Alice, J2). Oliver uses the application for practical, everyday language, noting, "I learned a lot of common communication sentences" (Oliver, J3). These diverse activities demonstrate the application's ability to cater to different language learning goals, including listening, speaking, vocabulary acquisition, and practical communication.

Furthermore, in the interviews, the participants talked about a variety of activities that they engaged in. Diana mentions, "watching videos, clips, conversations, or doing English Quizzes" (Diana, I) on the Cake application. Alice points out, "The application incorporates interactive exercises, games, and quizzes" (Alice, I). Lena focuses on speaking skills, stating, "Thanks to studying with Cake, my speaking skill has been improved remarkably" (Lena, I). These statements indicate that the Cake application offers diverse activities, including video-based learning, interactive exercises, and a focus on practical communication skills.

Providing personalized learning

Regarding providing personalized learning, the journals disclose that the Cake application appears to offer elements of personalized learning. For example, Lena values the ability to "choose your favorite topic to practice listening," indicating some level of learner control and customization. Alice also seems to benefit from targeted content, stating, "I learned a lot of expressions in the fashion field," (Alice, J4) suggesting the application provides content relevant to specific interests. Oliver's focus on "common communication sentences" (Oliver, J5) implies that the application offers practical, relevant material.

Furthermore, the interviews indicate that the Cake application provides a degree of personalized learning. Diana appreciates how the "application often reminds me of the lesson of the day" and "helps me always review knowledge and actively enthusiastically learn new knowledge from the lessons suggested every day of the application" (Diana, I). This suggests that the application provides some personalized guidance and structure to the learning process.

Giving feedback and correcting errors

It can be seen from the journal entries that feedback and error correction are key aspects of language learning, and the Cake application seems to address this. Diana explicitly mentions this feature, stating, "The feature of recording speech and analyzing errors with feedback from the application has helped me improve my pronunciation a lot" (Diana, J2). This direct feedback mechanism appears to be valuable for improving pronunciation skills.

In the interviews, Alice emphasizes the role of feedback in improving her pronunciation. She states, "Cake include pronunciation guides, audio lessons, and speech recognition features. These tools have helped me refine my pronunciation by providing instant feedback" (Alice, I). This highlights the application's focus on providing feedback to help learners improve their pronunciation skills.

In summary, the Cake application's design, control options, and features like adjustable playback speed and transcripts, as highlighted in the section on presentational schemes, contribute to an effective learning environment. The application facilitates improvements across various language skills, including listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as detailed in the

activity types. This is further enhanced by personalized learning features, such as topic selection, and the provision of direct feedback on errors, particularly in pronunciation, as evidenced in the “providing personalized learning" and "giving feedback and correcting errors" categories.

The interview transcript reveals that the Cake application enhances English learning through several key features, categorized into four coded themes. The application’s presentational schemes, particularly its mobile accessibility and diverse materials, offer a convenient and engaging learning environment. It provides a variety of activity types, including video lessons, interactive exercises, and a focus on speaking practice, catering to different learning styles and goals. The application also offers elements of personalized learning, such as daily lesson reminders and suggested content. Finally, it supports learners by giving feedback and correcting errors, especially in pronunciation, through features like pronunciation guides and speech recognition.

Overall, the five students demonstrated varied approaches to using the Cake application. Lena and Diana favored mobile phones and focused on listening and speaking skills, respectively, with Lena engaging in longer study sessions. Alice used a laptop for approximately 40 minutes per session, concentrating on vocabulary and sentence construction, particularly for expressing emotions and describing fashion. Oliver, also using a laptop, dedicated an hour to each session, focusing on practical, everyday language related to topics like education, travel, and sports. Phoebe, who preferred studying on her laptop for about 15 minutes at a time, valued the app's short videos with transcripts for improving comprehension. In short, the students utilized the Cake application in ways that aligned with their individual learning preferences and needs, demonstrating the application’s flexibility and adaptability.

5. Discussion

This exploratory study addresses two research questions: How EFL university students use the Cake application for self-study of the English speaking skill and what specific features of the Cake application students find most beneficial for learning the speaking skill. First, data from journals and interviews disclose that the EFL university students utilize the Cake application for self-study by taking advantage of its accessibility on mobile devices, which allows them to integrate learning into their daily routines and manage their study time effectively. They engage with the application’s diverse offerings, including video clips, conversations, and interactive exercises, to practice and improve their speaking skills. The application’s design empowers students to take a proactive approach to their learning. Second, the students find several features particularly beneficial for developing their speaking abilities. The emphasis on practical, everyday language and the opportunity to practice through conversations are highly valued. Additionally, features like pronunciation guides, audio

lessons, and speech recognition provide crucial feedback and support for improving pronunciation and overall fluency.

The findings of this study confirm the general benefits of MALL highlighted in the literature. The study confirms that MALL supports self-study and allows for anytime learning (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012), as students reported using the application during breaks and free moments, demonstrating the flexibility that mobile devices offer for language learning. This aligns with Wardak (2020) who emphasized the transformation of language education through MALL applications, offering learners unprecedented flexibility. Moreover, the study corroborates the notion that MALL can improve various language skills. Students reported improvements in speaking, vocabulary, reading, listening, and writing, which echoes the findings by D'mello and Graesser (2013) and Ikha'a (2023) on the positive impact of MALL on language proficiency.

However, this study goes beyond the general benefits of MALL by providing focused insights into the specific impact of the Cake application on English speaking skills. It identifies the specific features that students find most beneficial, such as the emphasis on practical communication, pronunciation guides, audio lessons, and speech recognition. The study also provides a detailed account of how students use the application and reveals that students utilize the application's diverse activities and appreciate its mobile accessibility, which allows them to integrate language learning into their daily lives. This detailed account of app usage and feature preferences among students is a valuable contribution, addressing the gap identified in the literature review regarding the need for focused research on specific applications like Cake.

Regarding the features of the Cake application, the findings indicate that the Cake application effectively utilizes presentational schemes to enhance the learning experience. The application’s mobile accessibility, as highlighted by the students' appreciation for its anytime, anywhere learning (Hubbard, 1996, 2006). The diverse range of materials, including video clips and conversations, also points to a well-designed presentational scheme that caters to different learning preferences. Besides, the study reveals that the Cake application offers a wide variety of activity types, from video-based learning to interactive exercises and games. This feature is crucial for maintaining learner engagement and motivation, and it allows students to develop different aspects of their language proficiency. The emphasis on practical communication aligns with the need for real-world application of language skills. Furthermore, while the study indicates some elements of personalized learning (Lee & Xiong, 2023; Li et al., 2022), such as topic choice and daily lesson reminders, this aspect could be further explored. The findings suggest that the Cake application has the potential to cater to individual learning needs and preferences, but future research could investigate the extent and effectiveness of these personalized features in more detail. In addition, the study highlights the importance of

feedback and error correction, particularly in pronunciation. The finding that students find pronunciation guides, audio lessons, and speech recognition features beneficial aligns with the literature on the importance of corrective feedback in language acquisition. The Cake application's focus on providing such feedback contributes to improved speaking skills.

The reflections of the participants in this study tended to report mainly the advantageous features of Cake, leaving the questions whether there are any disadvantages of using this application for self-study of the English speaking skill. It could be seen from the participants' journals and interviews that there seemed to lack personalized correction given by application for the participants which might be available in real-life conversations with native speakers or language partners. Moreover, relying solely on Cake might not expose the learners to a wide enough range of speaking styles, vocabulary used in different contexts, or the cultural nuances embedded in spoken language.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the Cake application's design and features, as categorized within the coding framework, contribute to its effectiveness as a tool for self-directed English language learning. The application's strong points lie in its presentational schemes, diverse activity types, and focus on feedback and error correction. By highlighting the effectiveness of specific Cake application features, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for educators and learners seeking to leverage mobile technology for enhanced language acquisition. The findings suggest that the Cake application, with its focus on practical language and interactive speaking practice, can be a valuable tool for promoting communicative competence, a key goal in language education.

Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for language education and the design of MALL applications. First, the study suggests that the Cake application can be a valuable tool for self-directed English language learning, particularly for improving speaking skills. Learners can leverage the application's accessibility, diverse activities, and focus on practical language to enhance their learning experience and achieve their language learning goals. Second, the study highlights the potential of MALL applications like Cake to supplement traditional classroom instruction and provide learners with additional opportunities for practice and self-study. Teachers can encourage their students to use such apps and integrate them into their teaching practices. The study also provides insights into the features that learners find most beneficial in a language learning app. Developers should prioritize the inclusion of features such as emphasis on practical, everyday language, opportunities for conversational practice, pronunciation guides, audio lessons, and speech recognition for feedback and error correction, engaging and diverse activities, and personalized learning experiences

The study suggests several avenues for future research. Further investigation is needed to explore the effectiveness of personalized learning features in MALL applications and to examine the long-term impact of using such apps on language proficiency. Additionally, research could explore the use of MALL applications in different cultural contexts and with learners of different age groups and proficiency levels.

This study has several limitations. Since it was an exploratory study involving a relatively small sample of EFL university students in Vietnam, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other populations or contexts. Future research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to confirm the generalizability of these results. Furthermore, the data was collected through journal entries and interviews, which rely on self-reporting. This type of data may be subject to bias, as participants may not always accurately recall or report their experiences. The study focused specifically on the Cake application. While this provides valuable insights into the use of one particular app, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other MALL applications. Future research could compare the effectiveness of different MALL applications. Since this study was conducted over a limited period, a longitudinal study could provide more information about the long-term effects of using the Cake application on language learning outcomes.

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