VocBlast: A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION ON THE USE VOCABULARY MOBILE APP FROM TEACHERS’ VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

Technology brings everything under one roof especially through the development of mobile phones. Previously, everyone was excited about downloading new ringtone for their phones. It got even better through time when mobile phone users can use their preferred mp3 as a ringtone. Today, the iPhone and Android users are overwhelmed by the number of applications that can be downloaded to help them in daily lives. There are applications for health, productivity and photo editing. Recently, there has been renewed interest when educators integrate mobile learning (m-learning) in their teaching. VocBlast, for instance, is a newly-developed engineering vocabulary mobile application (app) that is developed to assist engineering students at tertiary level to improve their mastery of English language. The current study, therefore, reviews the content in VocBlast from the language teachers’ perspectives. E-mail interviews were conducted employing four (4) language teachers in Universiti Malaysia Pahang. Based on the result, the participants agreed that the use of VocBlast in teaching and learning process is very helpful and able to benefit both, teachers and students. The app provides an indirect learning experience to the latter. At the same time, the features that are available in the app are appropriate and useful. Although VocBlast is still in the progress of development, the result presented may facilitate improvements of the app itself. Other than that, VocBlast can be considered as a new alternative for students to diversify their vocabulary learning experience.

Keyword: app, iPhone, m-learning, vocabulary, VocBlast

1. Introduction

One of the most significant current discussions in teaching English is the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Technology has been assisting educators as well as learners in both entities’ courses of teaching and learning. Previously, asynchronous communication in the use of emails was the popular choices among educators since they could provide feedback to the learners should assignments were to be assigned to the latter (Huett, 2004). Such communication eased the entities in that email correspondence in the educational environment improved interaction between them (Huett, 2004). Nowadays, however, communication goes beyond the use of email. Learners obtain feedback almost instantaneously with or without the teacher’s presence. Focusing on the language learning, in particular vocabulary, its learning may not requires the teachers to be in the classroom. Rather the uses language-learning solutions promote favorable
learning environment to the students compared to conventional methods such as Dictionary Strategy and Contextual Clues (Ali, Mukundan, Baki & Ayub, 2012).

Moreover, the proliferation of smart phones has created new opportunities in learning. The use of mobile applications; abbreviated to apps, provides opportunity for learning to occur both in and outside the classroom walls regardless of time and place. In fact, a growing body of literature has recognized the importance of using mobile apps in language learning specifically for vocabulary development. Bracke (2013) argues that mobile apps enable learners to learn vocabulary and reading in English. Therefore, in the section that follows, evaluation of contents of vocabulary apps conducted by previous researchers will be discussed.

A study that was conducted by Steel (2012) among 134 students revealed that some students in their study used dictionary apps to check and refer to the words they did not understand. The dictionary apps enabled them to check and refer to the words whenever and wherever they found convenience. Vocabulary memorization may also be improved with the use of mobile apps. In a study which was set out to determine the possibility of using mobile apps to improve the memorization of vocabulary, Hong, Hwang, Tai and Chen (2014) found that the use of EVL@S improved students’ confident level in storing the vocabulary they have learnt. The apps integrated a calibration scheme that helped learners to preview or review their vocabulary learning autonomy. Words were provided in a set of a memory cycle and allowed learners to practice them regularly. In other words, if they were unable to recognize the targeted words in their first round attempting to memorize the words, they may play the app for the second round. Wu (2015) showed that the use of Word Learning-CET6 among medical school students may assist them to obtain direct and indirect learning of specialized words in medicine in the form of wordlist. The app lessens the burden of having to memorize only the meaning of the words. In fact, it helped them to know spelling, pronunciation and Chinese definitions of the targeted words. In Malaysia a mobile app namely I-MMAPS for learning Iban language was developed to help users speak a basic level of the language. Chachil, Engkamat, Sarkawi and Shuib (2015) surveyed 30 non-native speakers of Iban after they underwent three learning contexts: vocabulary, basic phrases, and conversation using the app. The studies’ overall findings proposed that the app promoted positive interest among the participants in learning the language. This is true when audio using the voice of a native speaker and samples of graphic, is integrated in the app. Wylie (2013) analyzed the data obtained from a study funded by Department of Education in the United States of America concerning young learners educational gaming apps. The app; Martha Speaks Dog Party, improved approximately 31 percent of young learners’ vocabulary development. The respondents who were between three and seven years old were required to use the app for every day in the period of two weeks. It was also reported that games and quizzes were integrated in the app to assist them in learning new vocabulary. Meanwhile, Shih and Cheng (2015) identified that college students demonstrated a positive learning environment learning vocabulary, in particular spelling, using LINE APP. In their study, the vocabulary list of the app was derived from TOEIC. Using the app, they were reported that their level of confident was increased to a certain degree. In learning English vocabulary, the app provided listening aid in that they were able to listen to the correct use of vowels, consonants and syllables learning Basic English course.

In the literature on vocabulary apps discussed thus far, the relative use of vocabulary mobile app has been focusing on students as the tool’s main users. The applicability on the use of a particular app has not been investigated from the teachers’ point of views when in fact they are the instructional decisions makers (Walker, 2011). Their opinion is crucial to identify whether ones app meets their students’ learning needs or otherwise. Moreover, it seems that far too little attention has been paid to find out how the teacher evaluate an app in helping student to learn vocabulary. This paper,
therefore, reports the findings of a single research question concerning language teachers’ perception towards the use of vocabulary mobile app i.e. VocBlast in assisting students to learn technical vocabulary.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Materials - VocBlast

VocBlast consists of ten (10) different vocabulary games that are arranged according to the level of difficulty: Game 1, Game 2, Game 3, Game 4, Game 5, Game 6, Game 7, Game 8, Game 9 and Game 10. The vocabulary used in the vocabulary mobile app is taken from the Engineering textbooks. In term of the selection of the vocabulary, the selected one is those from high frequency vocabulary as well as its usefulness (Chitravelu, Sithamparam, & Choon, 2005). The app uses iOS as a platform to play the game. Figure 1 shows the screen shots of VocBlast.

![Figure 1: Screen shots of VocBlast](image)

**Game 1**
This game tests the learners’ spelling knowledge which they have to answer the questions correctly within the time limit of thirty (30) seconds. There are two levels in this game. Each of the level consists of fifteen (15) words. In order for the learner to proceed to Level 2, s/he must score a perfect 15/15. As for the question, it adapts the concept of multiple choice questions (MCQ) which the learner will be given three options- “TAB”, “TRIMME”, and “FOCRE”. When the learner has identified the correct answer; which is “TAB”, they need to click the box on the right side of the word and a tick will appear. The box will turn blue for the correct answer but will turn red for the incorrect answer. When the learner has answered all of the questions available in Level 1, the result will be revealed. On that page, learner will know the number of question that s/he gets correct and incorrect. Not only that, learner may review the question s/he has answered, return to Main Menu by clicking the “HOME” button and if the learner does not satisfy with the result, s/he can replay the level by clicking the “REPLAY” button.

![Figure 2: Screen shots of Game 1](image)
Game 2
After completing Game 1, the second game acquires the learner to match the definition with the correct word. The game has three (3) levels which each of the level contains six (6) words that the learner will have to match. The game play for this game is simple but the learner really has to pay close attention when matching the definition to its word. For each of the definition, e.g. “The absence of heat; a temperature considerably below normal”; four (4) options of answer are provided- “COLD”, “COMPOUND”, “COMMON”, and “COURSE”. As for this question, the answer is “COLD”, thus the learner will click on “COLD”. Once answered, the next question will appear automatically. For each of the level, the learner must at least answer five (5) correct questions. If they fail to do so, the level will be repeated but the order of the questions and its answers will be shuffled randomly. At the end of Game 2, the learner will be able to review their answers, return to Main Menu by clicking the “HOME” button and s/he can also replay the game by clicking the “REPLAY” button.

Game 3
Acquiring both of the vocabulary knowledge and spelling knowledge, Game 3 is where the learner will have to arrange the unscrambled letters into its correct spelling based on the definition. Like the previous game, this game has three (3) levels too and for each of it, the learner will be prompted with six (6) questions only. In this game, the unscrambled letters is at the top of the page followed by a space for the answer and lastly, the definition. In Game 3, hint is provided to help the learner. Only one hint is given for each of the question. Learner must at least get five (5) correct answers in order for s/he to proceed to Level 2 and Level 3. If s/he fails to achieve the score, another six (6) words will be randomly chosen for the learner to replay the level. There is a time limit for the learner to answer which is sixty (60) seconds. It will automatically restart for each of the new question. Every wrong answer is still accepted however it will be counted as zero. After answering all questions for Level 1, 2 or 3, the result will be viewed. Learner will able to check their result. If they score above five (5), they may click the “NEXT” button which will direct them to Level 2 or 3 and if they score below five (5), they will have to click the “REPLAY” button. Or else, they would not be able to proceed to next level.
Game 4
Almost similar to Game 3, this game acquires the learner to drag the letters into the boxes to form a word based on the definition given. Applying sixty (60) seconds as a time limit for each of the words, there is no specific score that the learner has to achieve. Instead, when s/he arranges the letters wrongly, a sound will produce and the boxes will blink in red. A pop-up will appear and inform the learner that the answer is wrong and they have to try to answer it again until they get a correct answer. If s/he fails to complete it within the period of the time limit, next word will automatically appear. Similar to the previous game, at the end of the game, learner may review her/his answer, return to Main Menu and replay Game 4.

![Figure 4: Screen shots of Game 4](image)

Game 5
For this game, the learner will have to guess the word based on the given definition. S/he has two (2) options of completing the task; either by dragging the letter to its correct box or by clicking the letter and the box that s/he wants to place it. When the answer is correct, the letters will turn to green and turn to red for the incorrect answer. Hint is also provided but in a limited amount. Throughout the level, learner can only use the hint for ten (10) times only. Each click on the “HINT” button, one (1) letter will be revealed. A “shuffle” option is introduced in this game. There is no limit in using the “shuffle” option. In addition to that, learner is allowed to skip the question and go to the next one. Learner can click the two arrows that is located on the bottom left of the page. By way of illustration, s/he has the freedom to choose which question to answer first.

![Figure 5: Screen shots of Game 5](image)

Game 6
In playing Game 6, the learner will have to guess the correct letters to be filled in the blanks. This game is about making connection between an image and the learner’s vocabulary knowledge. Similar to the previous games, it has three (3) different levels where each of the level will have ten (10) questions. Time limit of sixty (60) seconds is given. Once the time ends, next picture will appear; indicating that the player has failed. While playing, the image will appear one by one, reducing the distraction. At the end of the game, the score will be revealed as well as the time that the learner
has spent to answer all questions.

![Image of Game 6](image1.png)

**Figure 6: Screen shots of Game 6**

**Game 7**

Introducing crossword puzzle for Game 7, it applies the similar concept of playing the game. The task for this game is to complete the puzzle by referring to the clues that are provided. Unlike any typical crossword puzzle, the clue will not be listed on any side of the puzzle. In order for the learner to get a clue, all s/he has to do is to click the number of question that s/he wants to answer. Immediately a small pop-up will appear and the clue is revealed. Different to the other six (6) games before, this one would not have any score. Instead, the learner must complete all of the puzzles to make her/him eligible to move to the next game. To heat up the game, learner must complete this task in twenty (20) minutes.

![Image of Game 7](image2.png)

**Figure 7: Screen shots of Game 7**

**Game 8**

If in the previous games such as Game 4 and 5 definitions are given as clues, Game 8 takes that one notch higher. This game acquires the learner to define the word; specifically, Engineering words. Still employing the same concept where there are three (3) levels that the learner has to pass, only six (6) words will be randomly chosen from the database. Out of six (6), the learner must answer five (5) correct questions in order for them to move to the next level. Not only that, s/he needs to finish answering each of the questions within the period of sixty (60) seconds. As a result of exceeding the time limit, the learner will be considered as fail to answer the question. When s/he fails, another six (6) words will be randomly chosen from the database. On the page, the word will be located on the left side while three (3) choices of the definitions will be on the right side.
Game 9
Employing the concept of Word Search, the learner has to identify the word based on the given definition. Similar to Game 5 or 6, however, the choices of answer would not be given for Game 9. It is solely depending on their understanding of the definition and later search for the word. Instead of time limit, a little of twist is given to Game 9. Learner will be able to see the time that s/he has spent on completing the Word Search. At the end of the game, a pop-up will appear, congratulating the learner for the completion of the task and informing the time s/he has spent. In term of retrieving the definition, the learner has to click the number of the question that s/he intends to answer and the definition will appear under the Word Search box.

Game 10
The last game available in the vocabulary mobile app is Game 10 that adopts the multiple choice questions (MCQ) as its framework. There are fifteen (15) questions that the learner has to answer and to complete the task, they must at least score ten (10) and above. Since it adopts MCQ, five possible answers are available. For an example, taken from the app itself, the question would be “An infra-red __ pick-up signals from a hand-held remote control unit” and the choices of answer are as follow: “SENSORS”, “SPHERE”, “MAGNET”, “TOOL”, and “BOX”. When the learner click on the correct answer, which in this case is “SENSORS”, it will turn to blue, indicating that the learner has answered it correctly. Immediately, next question will appear. There is no time limit for Game 10.
2.2. Participants

Four female English teachers were involved in the study. They have been teaching English for at least a year up to 15 years in the Centre for Modern Languages & Human Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). They were chosen to participate in the study due to their familiarity in using smartphones. When asked about their frequent use of mobile apps, majority of them use communication apps (e.g. Whatsapp, Wechat and etc.), social network apps (Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, etc.), navigation apps (e.g. Garmin, Waze and etc.), dictionary apps (Oxford Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, etc.), utilities apps (CIMB Clicks, Maybank2U, etc.) and productivity apps (Dropbox, OneDrive, Google Drive, etc.) in their daily activities. For confidentiality, the teachers are identified by the alphanumerical codes (T1 to T4) in this paper.

2.3. Instruments

An interview protocol was prepared in interviewing the teachers. The interview protocol was divided into two parts. The first part concerns with asking the respondents their demographic information. The second part highlights the interview items themselves. Three open-ended interview items were formulated for this part. The first item concerns with the features of VocBlast, the second item ask the possibility of VocBlast in helping students to learn technical vocabulary while the final item relates to asking the appropriateness of using VocBlast in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to Second Language Learners (L2). To ensure validity of the data obtained, member checks was conducted in that data and its interpretation was presented to the respondents who were involved in the study (Merriam, 1998). On the other hand, to ensure reliability of the findings, an audit trail was performed (Merriam, 1998). It requires the researcher to explain in detail the collection of data, occurrence of categories and decisions made from the inquiry.

2.4. Procedures

The current study employed electronic mail (e-mail) in collecting data for the study. The medium was chosen since studies have shown that respondents tend to be more attentive when interview items were asked to them, and therefore, enabled them to respond in depth compared to face-to-face interview (Meho & Tibbo, 2003). The first procedure was to prepare the interview items. After the interview items were formulated, they were then shared in Google Docs. The procedure was then followed by sending e-mails to respective English teachers; in particular during third week of April 2015. In the e-mail, the English teachers were invited to participate in the interview item by clicking the URL stated. It was also stated in the e-mail that feedback needed to be sent in about a
week. To ensure they could respond to the e-mail interview, texts were also sent via WhatsApp asking their cooperation to participate in the study. The questions were answered by all of them for less than a week.

2.5. Data Analysis

In analyzing the data obtained from Google Docs, ‘Responses’ in the online document was assessed. All the items that were answered by the respondents were downloaded as Excel to ease the task of analyzing the data. In Excel, each interview item was made to occupy by one cell. Since data obtained was quite long, ‘Wrap Text’ was employed to ensure that entire responses could be seen on one screen. In categorizing and coding the data, columns were inserted to label relevant category. Then codes such as ‘A’, ‘B’ and others were created to label the category that emerged while reading the data. In the process of matching codes and their pertinent categories, changes were often made to reflect the ‘voices’ of the data.

3. Findings & Discussion

In order to assess the language teachers’ perception towards the use of VocBlast in assisting students to learn technical vocabulary, all their e-mail responses were analyzed. Four themes were formulated in answering the questions. The first theme, ‘hints to guide answer’ suggests that VocBlast is able to help students learn technical vocabulary as clues are provided to the learners when playing the game. T1 put it:

I think the content is good enough with questions and all the hints given. The hints might help the users to answer the questions within the time given (not spending a lot of time at a certain question which might lead to negative consequences like giving up, bored/lost interest, even stop playing).

Meanwhile T3 indicated to the notion of having pictures as clues helped players in guessing the answer for a question. She commented, “Some of the games include pictures and that would help the players to get the clue [to a question]”

The analysis that is conducted by Bracke (2013) suggests that clues or hints may not only help students in learning vocabulary, it may also help them learning grammar; in particular learning irregular verbs mobile app. Thus it can be deduced that inferences help players when responding to the questions in any type of gaming mobile app. Moreover, the use of pictures as clues or hints are consistent with the data obtained from Agca and Özdemir’s study (2013) study in that pictures may support the use of words helped students in learning vocabulary in mobile learning environment. Almost half percentage of them believed that pictures supported their learning of the targeted vocabulary.

Another theme, ‘excite students in engaging with the game’ proposes that having the time limit to ensure players can answer at a specific time ensure students’ excitement playing VocBlast. Furthermore, players can be more determine to go to the next level when they have completed the game at hands. T3 reported:

... most of the games set the time limit for the players to complete the task for each game, thus making them more excited and feel the urgency to complete the game within the time given.
A particular mobile app excites players when they keep on repeating and spending time to play the game (Shvebishi, 2014). One of the features of VocBlast is the time limit that is set for players to complete a game. Such finding can be associated with motivation theory in that a player is motivated playing a particular game when they are able to satisfy their needs. Moreover, according to Griffin (n.d.) the gratification theory is a very popular concept in designing mobile app. This concept is used to motivate players to complete certain actions in a given time-frame.

The third theme, ‘VocBlast serves a supplementary material for English for Specific Purposes (ESP)’, concerns with having teachers agreeing that the app may assist students in learning technical vocabulary as it can be a supplementary material for learning ESP. T3 believed that VocBlast certainly helped students in particular engineering students in learning ESP as she put it:

Yes, I think VocBlast is suitable to be used in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially the engineering students.

However, T4 commented that it may help students in learning ESP only when teachers were creative in using VocBlast. She said, “Yes [VocBlast is suitable to be used in the teaching of ESP but] with teachers’ creativity on how to use it”. Though T1 agreed that VocBlast may serve as a supplementary tool for teaching, she, however, responded that not all the contents in the app can be used for ESP. Therefore, it could not be the core material for teachers to teach ESP.

Subramanya (2014) argues that learners can be more motivated when apps are used as course supplements. He further argues that they act as catalysts for education and learning due to several reasons: empowering the conventional content of teaching and learning, promoting independent learning, encouraging multiple types of learning styles and elevating the stagnant content of conventional teaching and learning methods. In VocBlast, players may not only learn the target vocabulary by having only one element of multimedia that is text. In fact, the app integrates graphics or still images as well in enhancing the learning of ones students. Such elements promote intrinsic motivation among players (Moos & Marroquin, 2010).

The final theme, ‘indirect vocabulary learning’ posed that VocBlast helped players to use their deductive and inductive thinking figuring out answers for each game. Talking about this issue T1 opined: “... in my opinion, it can be used to develop the users’ technical vocabulary indirectly through guessing and interpreting skills which required to be used when playing the games.

This result is in accord with a study that investigated the use of mobile app; in particular dictionary, that was able to promote incidental vocabulary learning among students in their academic study. Song (2008) found that app in PDA, due to its flexibility in accessing it, could encourage both formal and informal learning environments to students at tertiary level. In the case of VocBlast, however, the app can only be assessed by students who are using the mobile operating system created and developed by Apple Inc. Therefore, at the current stage, the accessibility of the app is still limited.

4. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

The development of mobile applications particularly for learning purposes can benefit many parties. The finding of the current study found that language teachers have positive perceptions towards the use VocBlast in teaching and learning process. Moreover, findings of the study suggested that educators are ready to include MALL into the instructional activities (Jazihan Mahat, Ahmad Fauzi Mohd Ayub, Su Luan, & Wong, 2012; Rezaei, Mai, & Pesaranghader, 2014. The findings of the study also seem to suggest that there was no difference in attitudes among senior and junior teachers in using m-learning (Kobak & Taskin, 2012). This reflects the openness that teachers have towards m-learning. Last but not least, further work needs to be done to establish whether involving students in
a survey could yield more input on the use of VocBlast in helping students to enrich their technical vocabulary.

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