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Exploring students' perceptions of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in English language learning

Muhammad Al Ghufran[1*], Siti Rahimah Yusra[1]
[1] English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Padang
Correspondence Email: afanghufran@gmail.com

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Abstract:
Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) allows learners to engage with English through mobile devices, applications, and online platforms beyond the classroom. This exploratory qualitative study examined how 31 Grade XI students in the Computer and Network Engineering program at SMK N 3 Padang perceived the benefits and challenges of using MALL for English learning. Data were collected through an 11-item open-ended questionnaire and analyzed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged: MALL as an Enjoyable and Engaging Learning Environment; Perceived Support for Language Development; and Challenges of Mobile-Assisted Learning. Participants described music, podcasts, videos, translation tools, and learning applications as engaging ways to encounter English. They perceived these activities as supporting vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking, and writing, although the study did not measure language proficiency. Reported challenges included limited teacher guidance, digital distractions, unstable internet connections, and device or application limitations. Participants also described self-regulatory strategies, including setting study times, making schedules, and muting notifications. The findings suggest that students in this vocational cohort viewed MALL positively but recognized that its usefulness depends on teacher guidance, reliable resources, and learners' ability to manage independent study. These findings support using mobile learning as a supplement to classroom instruction, with structured learning goals, accessible materials, and opportunities to request clarification and feedback.

Keywords:
Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Student Perceptions, Vocational High School Students, English Language Learning

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Mobile technology has become a common resource for language learning because smartphones and tablets allow learners to access text, audio, video, and interactive activities beyond the classroom. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) refers to the use of mobile technologies to support language learning and extends computer-assisted language learning through the portability and flexible use of handheld devices (Çakmak, 2019; Kukulska-Hulme, 2020). Research has also examined MALL as a way of supporting self-directed English learning,

with learners able to choose when and how they engage with learning resources (Jeong, 2022). These affordances can help students connect classroom instruction with regular opportunities to encounter English.

Prior research has examined MALL across different learning purposes and language skills. Ghorbani and Ebadi (2020), for example, investigated the use of Telegram for grammar learning, while Sanjaya et al. (2024) examined mobile-assisted materials for descriptive-text learning. Studies focused on particular skills have reported positive results for reading (Keezhatta & Omar, 2019), writing (Pingmuang & Koraneekij, 2022), listening (Alzieni, 2020), and speaking (Li, 2024). Gou (2023) reported learning gains in a study using mobile applications and online collaboration, and Ishaq et al. (2021) reviewed mobile-assisted and gamified language learning. Demouy et al. (2016) also described learners' use of mobile devices across everyday settings. These studies provide a rationale for considering mobile technology in language education, but they do not by themselves explain how learners in a particular setting perceive its usefulness or the difficulties they experience. Chaitanya (2024) also considered MALL for language enrichment among tertiary-level learners.

Research has also considered students' and teachers' perceptions of MALL. Nuraeni et al. (2020) reported generally positive student perceptions alongside problems such as internet connectivity. Nariyati et al. (2020) examined EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of mobile-assisted language teaching, while Wan Azli et al. (2018) focused on vocational college students learning English as a second language. Other studies have examined learner engagement and preferences in mobile-assisted classes (Yang & Hu, 2023) and reading engagement (Sheng, 2025). Nguyen (2024) explored the relationship between MALL and autonomous English learning. Together, these studies show that perceptions are shaped by context and purpose; they also point to the need to examine not only general attitudes but the specific experiences learners report when they use mobile tools for English.

Despite its potential benefits, mobile learning can introduce distractions from notifications, social media, and non-educational content (Nguyen, 2024). Learners may also face difficulties when they encounter unfamiliar material without sufficient teacher guidance (Nuraeni et al., 2020). Access to suitable devices and reliable internet connections can vary, creating practical barriers to participation (Chartrand, 2016; Dia, 2024; Gikas & Grant, 2013). These issues suggest that mobile access alone does not guarantee productive language learning. Research therefore needs to consider the benefits students perceive alongside the constraints that may shape their learning experiences.

Self-regulated learning (SRL) provides a useful perspective for interpreting these experiences. SRL involves learners' efforts to plan, monitor, and regulate their learning activities. In mobile-assisted learning, this may include setting study times, choosing appropriate resources, checking understanding, and managing digital distractions. Research has connected MALL with self-directed learning and learner autonomy (Jeong, 2022; Yang & Hu, 2023), while Nakata et al. (2025) highlight the role of self-regulated behaviours in language learning. However, learner autonomy should not be understood as learning without support: students may still need clear instructions, suitable resources, and opportunities to ask teachers for clarification.

The issue is particularly relevant in vocational education, where English is both an academic subject and a resource for future workplace communication. During a pre-service teaching activity at SMK N 3 Padang, the researcher observed that students frequently used smartphones and computers for classroom activities, including Google Translate, YouTube, and Quizizz. This observation provided the local context for the present study rather than a systematic measurement of students' technology use. Students in the Computer and Network

Engineering program may be familiar with digital tools for technical tasks, but that familiarity does not necessarily explain how they experience those tools when learning English. Understanding their perceptions can help teachers select relevant materials and anticipate the support students need.

Within the studies reviewed for this article, some previous research has measured overall perceptions through surveys, while other studies have focused on the outcomes of particular applications or language skills. Less detail is available in this reviewed set about how vocational learners describe the benefits and challenges of MALL together and how they manage distractions and independent study in their own learning context. This contextual and exploratory gap is important because Computer and Network Engineering students may use digital technology frequently while still facing language-learning, instructional, and connectivity challenges. Exploring their self-reported accounts can provide a fuller picture of how MALL is experienced in vocational English learning.

To address this gap, the present study used an exploratory qualitative design to examine Grade XI students in the Computer and Network Engineering program at SMK N 3 Padang. It was guided by two research questions: (1) How do these students perceive the benefits of MALL for English language learning? and (2) What challenges do they report when using MALL, and what strategies do they describe for managing those challenges?

2. METHOD

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine students' self-reported perceptions of MALL in English learning. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' interpretations and experiences rather than test MALL's effectiveness through standardized language-performance measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus was on the benefits, challenges, and learning strategies described by the participants in relation to using mobile devices and platforms to learn English.

The study was conducted at SMK N 3 Padang and involved 31 Grade XI students from class XI TKJT 1 in the Computer and Network Engineering program. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had prior experience using mobile technology for English language learning. This criterion was relevant to the research questions, which required participants to describe experiences of using MALL rather than speculate about a tool they had never used.

The primary data source was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 11 questions. The questions addressed participants' background and use of mobile resources, the applications and activities they used for English, perceived benefits for engagement and language learning, challenges during independent learning, and strategies for managing study time and distractions. The questionnaire was adapted with reference to Guo (2022) for benefits and demographic information, Nuraeni et al. (2020) for challenges, and Alnufaie (2022) for user experiences. Representative examples of the question areas included "Which mobile applications or platforms do you use to learn English, and how do you use them?" and "What difficulties do you face when using mobile devices to learn English?" The wording was adjusted to align with the objectives of the present study, and an English Department lecturer reviewed the questionnaire for relevance to the research objectives. The open-ended questionnaire was administered to participants using Google Forms. Participants were asked to answer the open-ended prompts in their own words.

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher

examined recurring ideas across responses and organized related codes into three themes. Frequency counts are reported only as descriptive aids to show how often a topic was mentioned and to contextualize the qualitative interpretation. Because participants could mention more than one activity or challenge, these counts are not treated as inferential statistical evidence or as measures of language-learning effectiveness.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Participants' reported use of MALL for English learning

Data were collected using the 11-item open-ended questionnaire, which explored participants' experiences, perceived benefits, and reported challenges related to MALL. Participants could mention more than one application, activity, benefit, or challenge; accordingly, the reported frequencies summarize mentions rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Table 1.

Participants' reported daily time spent using mobile resources for English learning

No.	Reported time category	Frequency
1	1 hour or more	26
2	4 hours or more	4
3	6 hours or more	1

Table 1 summarizes the time categories recorded in participants' responses. Twenty-six students selected "1 hour or more," four selected "4 hours or more," and one selected "6 hours or more." Overall, the responses indicate that participants used mobile resources for English learning for different lengths of time. These figures describe reported use and should not be interpreted as evidence of how much language learning occurred during those periods.

MALL as an Enjoyable and Engaging Learning Environment

Participants described MALL as an enjoyable way to encounter English, particularly when they could use content that matched their interests. Listening to music or podcasts was mentioned by 20 participants, and watching videos or films by 16. Other activities included translation tools, applications or websites, and reading. Participants linked digital media and interactive activities with greater interest and motivation. These responses suggest that enjoyment was associated not only with the use of a mobile device but also with the choice of personally relevant content and the opportunity to engage with English outside formal lessons. Participant 3's response illustrates this perception:

> Participant 3: "YouTube for watching movies or listening to music, it gives me more motivation because there are some movies with a lot of interesting English vocabulary."

Perceived Support for Language Development

Participants perceived MALL as supporting their language learning, particularly vocabulary and listening. Twelve participants mentioned vocabulary, and 11 mentioned listening; participants also referred to reading, speaking, and writing. These responses indicate which skills students believed were supported by mobile activities, but no language-proficiency tests or performance tasks were used to verify actual improvement.

Participants described using a range of applications and platforms. Google Translate was mentioned by 21 participants, Spotify by 11, YouTube by 10, TikTok by eight, Instagram by four,

and Duolingo by three. These tools gave students different ways to access translations and English-language audio or visual content. Participants' descriptions suggest that such resources were perceived as useful for independent practice and repeated exposure to English. Participant 7's response provides an example of how the tools were used:

> Participant 7: "I use Spotify to listen to music, YouTube to watch videos in English or to help with my studies, and Google Translate to translate into Indonesian or vice versa."

Challenges of Mobile-Assisted Learning

Participants also described challenges that complicated their use of MALL. Seventeen participants mentioned a lack of teacher guidance, especially when they encountered unfamiliar material and had no immediate opportunity to ask for clarification. These responses suggest that access to online resources did not always provide the explanation or feedback students needed to continue learning confidently.

Maintaining focus was another reported difficulty, mentioned by 15 participants. Notifications were the most frequently noted distraction (22 participants), while social media and advertisements or pop-ups were each mentioned by six participants, and games by four. These responses show how the same device could provide learning resources while also offering competing, non-academic content. Participant 29 described this difficulty:

> Participant 29: "The biggest challenge I face is staying focused. Since I'm studying on my phone, my attention is often distracted by notifications from other applications or the temptation to check social media. Also, without direct guidance from a teacher, sometimes I feel confused when I encounter complex grammar or unclear explanations in the online material."

Technical barriers were also reported. Twenty-two participants mentioned unstable internet connections, six referred to application errors, and four mentioned limited device performance. These problems could interrupt access to online resources and make learning less continuous. The findings therefore point to the importance of reliable connectivity and adequate devices, although the study did not independently test participants' internet services or devices.

Participants also reported strategies for managing independent learning: 16 described setting a specific learning time, 11 mentioned making a study schedule, and six reported turning off notifications or using "do not disturb" mode. These strategies can be interpreted as attempts to plan study and control the learning environment. However, the questionnaire data do not establish how consistently participants applied these strategies or how much they affected learning outcomes.

3.2. Discussion

MALL as an Enjoyable and Engaging Learning Environment

The findings suggest that students' positive perceptions of MALL were shaped by the content and activities they chose, such as music, podcasts, and videos, as well as the convenience of accessing them on mobile devices. This is an important contextual contribution: for these vocational students, English learning was not limited to formal exercises but was also connected with media they already enjoyed. The pattern is compatible with research emphasizing interactive activities and gamified resources as potential sources of motivation (Ishaq et al., 2021; Qhoirulita & Fakhrurriana, 2024), and with descriptions of MALL as enabling access to learning opportunities across different times and settings (Kukulska-Hulme, 2020). However, enjoyment should not be equated automatically with sustained learning; teachers can help students connect engaging content to clear language-learning goals and follow-up tasks.

Perceived Support for Language Development

Participants believed that repeated contact with English through translation tools, songs, podcasts, and videos supported their vocabulary and listening, and in some cases their reading, speaking, and writing. This is evidence of perceived support, not demonstrated language gains: the study included no pre-test, post-test, or independent assessment of proficiency. Prior studies have investigated MALL in relation to vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking outcomes (Alzieni, 2020; Keezhatta & Omar, 2019; Lăpădat, 2023; Li, 2024; Pingmuang & Koraneekij, 2022), but the present study contributes a different kind of evidence by showing which tools and skills students themselves associated with learning. Although Yusra and Hanifa (2023) examined online media for extensive-listening practice, the present questionnaire did not establish that students followed a structured extensive-listening routine. Their use of songs and podcasts is therefore interpreted here as self-selected exposure to English audio rather than proof that an extensive-listening programme was implemented. This distinction keeps the interpretation aligned with the data collected.

Challenges of Mobile-Assisted Learning

The findings indicate that access to mobile content did not remove students' need for instructional support. Participants described becoming confused when online explanations were unclear or when they could not ask a teacher for help. This extends the general finding that learners can view MALL positively while still experiencing practical problems (Nuraeni et al., 2020): in this vocational cohort, the ability to use a device was not always enough to resolve language questions. Digital distraction was another tension. From an SRL perspective, setting study times and muting notifications can be understood as ways of planning and controlling the learning environment. These strategies are consistent with the role of learner autonomy and self-directed activity discussed by Jeong (2022), Yang and Hu (2023), and Nakata et al. (2025), but the students' reports also indicate that self-regulation should be taught and supported rather than assumed.

The technical barriers reported in this study also have practical implications. Teachers can provide a short list of reliable mobile resources linked to specific English objectives, explain how students should use them, and provide follow-up activities that help learners check their understanding. Teachers can also model practical self-regulation strategies, such as setting a study goal, allocating a realistic study period, switching off non-essential notifications, and recording unfamiliar language for later discussion. Where connectivity or device performance is unreliable, low-bandwidth or downloadable materials can help students participate without depending on a stable connection throughout the task. These implications are especially relevant given the access and infrastructure challenges discussed by Gikas and Grant (2013), Chartrand (2016), and Dia (2024). Overall, the present study suggests that MALL should complement teacher guidance and classroom interaction, not replace them.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored how 31 Grade XI Computer and Network Engineering students at SMK N 3 Padang perceived the benefits and challenges of using MALL for English learning. In response to the first research question, students generally described MALL as enjoyable and as a useful source of support for language learning, especially through self-selected digital media and mobile applications. In response to the second question, they reported difficulties involving limited teacher guidance, distractions, unstable internet connections, and device or application limitations. Some participants also described strategies for managing their learning, including setting study times, making schedules, and muting notifications.

The three themes, MALL as an Enjoyable and Engaging Learning Environment, Perceived Support for Language Development, and Challenges of Mobile-Assisted Learning show that students' perceptions included both opportunities and constraints. The study's contribution is its contextual account of how vocational students described the relationship between preferred digital content, perceived language-learning support, and the practical conditions of independent study. The findings do not demonstrate that MALL improved students' proficiency; rather, they show which benefits and challenges participants perceived in their own use of mobile resources.

The findings have several pedagogical implications. Teachers can connect engaging content to explicit language objectives, provide clear instructions and opportunities for clarification, recommend reliable resources, and help learners develop routines for managing time and digital distractions. Schools should also consider the availability of internet access and device capabilities when planning mobile-based tasks. Supporting student autonomy requires more than asking students to study independently; it involves helping them select resources, plan activities, monitor understanding, and seek assistance when needed.

This study has limitations. It was conducted at one vocational school with 31 participants from one program, so the findings should not be generalized to all vocational students. The study relied on one data source an open-ended questionnaire and did not include interviews, classroom observations, or objective measures of English proficiency. The responses therefore represent self-reported experiences and perceptions. Future research could include students from different vocational programs and schools, combine questionnaires with interviews and observations, and use language-performance measures where the aim is to examine actual development. These approaches could clarify how students' perceptions relate to their learning practices and outcomes.

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