

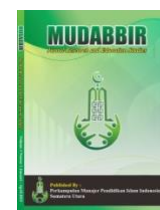


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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING DROPS APPLICATION IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore students' perceptions towards the use of Drops application in learning English vocabulary. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten students majoring in Islamic Education in Medan who have used Drops application independently. The results showed that most students had positive experiences using Drops, mainly due to its visual, interactive and gamification features that enhance motivation as well as memorization. However, some challenges were also identified, such as limited context of vocabulary use, lack of personalization of materials, and mismatch of content with academic needs. The study concludes that while Drops is effective as an additional learning tool, integration into a more targeted and contextualized formal learning system is needed to make vocabulary learning more meaningful and applicable.

Keywords: Drops, vocabulary learning, student perception, mobile-assisted learning

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental component of language learning, directly influencing reading comprehension, writing proficiency, and overall communication skills (Nation, 2009). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), developing a strong vocabulary is essential for students to engage with authentic texts, express ideas fluently, and improve their linguistic competence (Schmitt, 2010). However, traditional vocabulary learning methods, such as rote memorization and dictionary-based study, often fail to engage students effectively, leading to low retention rates and a lack of motivation (Folse, 2004). With the advancement of technology, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as an effective

alternative, offering learners interactive and engaging tools to enhance vocabulary acquisition (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Among the many available applications, Drops has gained attention for its gamified approach, visually driven learning, and time-limited practice sessions. Drops presents vocabulary items through visual mnemonics and interactive exercises, aiming to reinforce memory retention in a fun and engaging manner (Zhou & Lam, 2022).

Despite the increasing popularity of mobile applications for vocabulary learning, there is limited research on students' perceptions of Drops. While various studies have explored the effectiveness of digital tools in vocabulary acquisition, few have specifically examined how learners interact with Drops, whether they find it effective, and what challenges they face when using it. These challenges include vocabulary retention, motivation, and the contextualization of vocabulary. For example, vocabulary retention remains a major issue among language learners due to a lack of meaningful reinforcement (Brown et al., 2023), and gamified applications like Drops claim to increase motivation, yet it is necessary to investigate whether this motivation is sustained over time (Lee, 2021; Chairuna, et.al., 2024). Moreover, many vocabulary learning apps, including Drops, emphasize isolated word learning rather than contextualized usage, which hinders students' ability to apply new vocabulary in real-world communication (Nation, 2013).

Several studies have explored mobile applications like Duolingo, Wattpad, and Hello English in fostering vocabulary retention and acquisition (Auliya et al., 2021; Anggraini et al., 2023), but limited attention has been given to Drops, particularly in terms of how students perceive its effectiveness. Additionally, while gamification is often praised for enhancing motivation, its long-term impact on vocabulary retention remains debated (Fithriani et al., 2021; Lee, 2021). Moreover, the lack of adaptive learning features in some apps, including Drops, means students may struggle to find relevant vocabulary based on their academic needs or proficiency level (Li & Hafner, 2022).

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring students' experiences and challenges when using Drops for vocabulary learning. Unlike previous research that primarily evaluates the effectiveness of digital tools based on performance metrics, this study focuses on the qualitative aspect—students' perceptions of how the app affects their learning process. Specifically, it investigates whether Drops' gamified features truly enhance vocabulary retention and application in real-world contexts. By providing insights into students' experiences, this study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective and personalized vocabulary learning tools for EFL learners.

1. How do students experience using Drops for vocabulary learning?
2. What challenges do students face when using Drops as a vocabulary learning tool?

The primary objective of this study is to explore students' experiences and challenges when using Drops to learn English vocabulary. This research aims to understand how students interact with the app, what factors influence their learning process, and the difficulties they encounter while using Drops. By analyzing these aspects, this study seeks to provide insights for educators and developers on how to enhance mobile-assisted vocabulary learning to better support EFL learners.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to describe in depth the perceptions and experiences of students in using the Drops application as a medium for learning English vocabulary. Descriptive design aims to present information based on conditions or phenomena that take place naturally, without manipulation of variables. The subjects in this study were ten students majoring in Islamic education from one of the private universities in Medan. The criteria for selecting participants included students who had experience in using the application independently in learning English vocabulary.

The main Instrument used in this research was semi-structured interviews. The researcher developed an interview guideline consisting of five open-ended questions that aimed to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in using the Drops application. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom to save time and make it easier to conduct. Data collection was conducted over a period of one month. Each participant was interviewed for 15 to 30 minutes, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques that involved reading the transcripts in depth, identifying thematic patterns, grouping answers by category, and compiling thematic narratives based on the main findings. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher used member checking techniques by reconfirming the summary of the interview results with the participants.

To ensure data reliability, the researcher maintained consistency in the interview process by using the same interview guidelines for all participants. All interviews were conducted by the researcher herself to ensure uniformity of information gathering techniques. In addition, the researcher also applied member checking by requesting confirmation from participants on the summary of the interview results to minimise misinterpretation. The analysis process was conducted systematically and recorded in detail as part of an audit trail, so that the process could be reviewed and accounted for by others. These steps aim to increase the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Experience of Using the Drops Application.

Eight out of ten participants described their learning experience using Drops as fun and interesting. They felt that the visual-based learning method and short learning time made the learning activity less burdensome. P1 stated, "Learning through Drops is like playing a game. It doesn't feel heavy even though it's open every day."

In addition, P2 revealed, "I regularly open it every morning before class, because it only takes five minutes, so it doesn't interfere with my schedule." The ease of accessing the application anytime and anywhere is also an important factor that makes

participants feel comfortable, as stated by P3, "I can use my five minutes of free time. I use it while waiting for the bus or in the canteen." Furthermore, upon further investigation, within the five-minute usage of the Drops app, participants typically engage in a series of activities that include selecting specific vocabulary topics (e.g., food, everyday objects, or professions), followed by completing a daily practice session consisting of various interactive exercises such as matching words with images, drag-and-drop, and listening to word pronunciations and selecting the appropriate translations. Each session typically features around 10–15 new words or repetitions of previously learned words through the spaced repetition system. This five-minute timeframe is considered sufficient by participants because sessions in Drops are designed to be short and focused. This allows them to remain consistent in their learning without feeling overwhelmed, making vocabulary learning a light yet productive part of their daily routine. However, two participants, P6 and P10, mentioned that their experience was less than optimal because they quickly felt bored or did not find vocabulary that aligned with their academic needs. Despite this, they still acknowledged that the app could be an alternative option when study time is limited.

Features that Improve Memory Retention in Vocabulary Learning.

Most participants (9 out of 10) rated the visual and interactive features as the main strengths of the Drops app. The images, illustrations, and word pronunciations were considered to enhance memory retention. P5 said, "I can remember longer because of the funny and unique pictures." This aligns with P7's statement, "If it's just text, I forget quickly. But if it's accompanied by images and sound, it sticks better."

Some participants also praised the spaced repetition system, which allowed them to frequently recall vocabulary they had already learned. P2 said, "Sometimes I forget the meaning of a word, but Drops will bring it up again, so I can remember it." The drag-and-drop feature was also seen as appealing because it requires direct interaction, making the learning process less monotonous. According to P8, "I often get engrossed in dragging words around because it's like a puzzle." Only one participant (P10) felt that the features were too simple and not suitable for the level of ability expected of final-year students.

Increased Motivation to Learn

The gamification feature in Drops proved to be a key factor in motivating students to learn. Seven participants mentioned that they were more motivated to learn because of the daily targets, level system, and challenges. P4 said, "I like the levels. Every time I level up, I feel like I'm making progress." Meanwhile, P9 said, "There are daily reminders. So I feel like I'm being reminded to study."

Some participants even mentioned that the Drops app had become a pleasant daily routine. P3 stated, "I usually open Drops before going to bed, it's become a habit." However, three participants (P6, P10, and part of P5) mentioned that their motivation was not always stable. If the material presented was too repetitive or the topic was irrelevant, their interest would decline. P10 said, "At first I was enthusiastic, but

eventually I got bored because the words were always the same and didn't suit my studies."

Challenges in Using the Application

The main challenge experienced by participants was related to the limited context in which vocabulary was used. Six participants (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, and P9) stated that they had difficulty understanding the meaning of words comprehensively because there were no contextual examples of sentences or situations in which the words were used in the Drops app.

P4 said, "I'm confused about when to use that word. I know the meaning, but I don't know the context." P1 expressed a similar sentiment, saying that although he could memorise the meaning of words from pictures and translations, he was often unsure about how to use them in sentences. "Sometimes I know the meaning, but I don't understand when and how to use it in conversation or writing." P3 also noted that without context, he tends to only remember the surface meaning of a word. "I can remember the image and the meaning of the word, but I don't know what it's usually used for, or what situations it's appropriate to use it in." This shows that simply knowing the definition does not guarantee the ability to apply vocabulary in real communication.

P6 complained that he often felt lost when applying new vocabulary in everyday conversation because the app only provided words and images without explaining their usage. "Drops only gives words and images. But there are no sentences. So I don't understand when to use the words." P7 added that learning without example sentences forces them to search for usage examples outside the app, which is inconvenient. "I usually have to look up Google or ask friends for example sentences. Because Drops only has words and sounds." P9 also emphasised this shortcoming by saying, "I often know what the word means, but I'm not sure if it can be used in academic writing or casual conversation. So I'm confused about the context." The absence of context poses a significant barrier in the vocabulary learning process because understanding a word involves not only its lexical meaning but also how and when it is used in social situations, text types, or specific functions (e.g., formal vs. Informal).

In addition, limitations in choosing learning materials or topics are a problem in themselves. P6 feels that he cannot tailor the content to his personal interests. "Sometimes I want to learn about lecture topics, but I can't choose the topics," he said. P10 added, "Some words are too basic and not relevant to my major." The learning duration of only about five minutes per day is also deemed insufficient for those who wish to delve into more complex vocabulary. P5 stated, "If it's only five minutes, it's good for a routine, but it's not enough for in-depth learning."

Potential Implementation in Formal Learning.

Most participants (8 out of 10) stated that the Drops app has the potential to be used in formal learning, especially as a complementary medium. They suggested that

the app be used as weekly assignments or independent exercises that are then linked to lecture material.

P1 said, “If lecturers give assignments using Drops and then discuss them in class, that would be great.” Meanwhile, P8 suggested using it in a blended learning system, combining online and face-to-face learning activities. P3 and P7 also stated that Drops is suitable for use as a tool for beginner students or as additional vocabulary enrichment outside of class. However, P10 cautions that the application needs to be aligned with the curriculum to avoid discrepancies between the material covered in the app and what is taught in class. Some participants also suggest that the Drops app be directly integrated into coursework by instructors to ensure its use is more targeted and supportive of learning. As P5 puts it, “If instructors provide guidance on using Drops, it will be more effective.”

DISCUSSION

Students Experience Using Drops

Most participants in this study reported that using the Drops app provided an enjoyable and stress-free learning experience. The app’s attractive visual features, short learning sessions (around 5 minutes), and ease of access made vocabulary learning feel more relaxed yet consistent. Statements such as “learning feels like playing a game” illustrate the app’s success in creating a learning environment that is closer to entertainment (edutainment). This aligns with the research by Fithriani et al. (2021), which states that gamified learning can enhance user engagement and comfort.

However, the findings also revealed limitations. Two out of ten participants felt bored quickly or did not find vocabulary that suited their academic needs. This means that general applications such as Drops tend to be less effective for advanced students who need specific material. These findings reinforce Vygotsky’s (1978) idea about the importance of the zone of proximal development—learning materials should be within the reach of students’ development so that they are challenging yet still learnable. The flexibility of time and place (learning anywhere and anytime) is also a strength of this app. This aligns with the findings of KukulskaHulme & Shield (2008) that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) provides contextual and personalised learning experiences tailored to individual learning styles.

Effectiveness of Visual, Interactive, and Spaced Repetition Features

Students rated visual and interactive features as Drops’ main strengths. Images and pronunciation sounds make vocabulary easier to remember and more enjoyable to learn. These findings are in line with Paivio’s dual coding theory (1986), which explains that information processed visually and verbally at the same time is easier to remember because it enters two memory pathways in the brain.

The spaced repetition feature was also appreciated by participants because it helped them to repeat previously learned vocabulary, thereby strengthening their memory retention. These findings are consistent with the study by Teymouri et al. (2023), which showed that scheduled, gradual repetition enhances memory retention in

academic vocabulary learning. Although Teymouri studied the use of digital flashcards and did not mention features like drag-and-drop, the underlying principle is similar: repeated retrieval practice strengthens memory. Regarding the drag-and-drop feature, although it has not been extensively studied in MobileAssisted Vocabulary Learning (MAVL) literature, it emerges as a new finding in this research. Participants felt the feature was like playing a puzzle, making learning more enjoyable. This supports Bruner's (1996) constructivist theory that students learn actively through direct interaction with the material.

Gamification and Motivation Enhancement

Gamification features such as levels, daily targets, point systems, and notifications have proven to be key motivators for student learning. Students feel more motivated because they receive immediate feedback on their progress. This finding aligns with Deci & Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises the importance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation.

Some students stated that daily notifications made them feel like they were being "billed" for learning, a psychological effect that actually increased learning consistency. This phenomenon was also found in a study by Deterding et al. (2011) on gamification, where game elements in educational applications were proven to trigger learning routines. However, this motivation was not always stable. Three participants reported that their motivation declined over time due to material that felt repetitive or irrelevant to their academic context. This reinforces the findings of Amari et al. (2014), who emphasised that the success of gamification heavily depends on the quality of content. In other words, gamification alone is insufficient; relevant and adaptive content is essential.

Challenge: Lack of Context and Personalisation of Material.

One of the main challenges identified was the lack of context in the use of vocabulary. Drops presents words and their translations, but without including example sentences or real-life situations. Most participants stated that although they knew the meaning of the words, they were confused about how to use them. This reinforces the criticism from Schmitt (2000) and Nation (2013) that vocabulary mastery is more meaningful when accompanied by social and grammatical context.

Students also stated that they had to search for sentence examples outside the application, indicating that Drops does not yet fully support self-contained learning. This contrasts with the findings of Xodabande et al. (2023), which showed that MAVLs that present contextually-based task content are more effective in building productive vocabulary skills. Additionally, many participants felt unable to choose topics that aligned with their needs or interests. This indicates that Drops has not implemented adaptive learning, as outlined by Li & Hafner (2022), who emphasise the importance of content customisation to make learning more relevant and personalised.

Potential for Integration in Formal Learning.

Most participants stated that Drops could be an effective tool if integrated into formal learning, such as through weekly assignments or blended learning. Students believe that the use of Drops would be more optimal if guided by lecturers, for example by linking topics in the application to lecture materials. These findings support the blended learning approach suggested by Garrison & Vaughan (2008), which combines online and face-to-face learning to enhance learning outcomes. However, this integration must consider curriculum alignment, students' skill levels, and teacher support strategies to ensure the app is not merely an add-on but an integral part of a planned learning process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the Drops application provides a convenient, enjoyable, and effective supplementary tool for vocabulary learning among EFL students. Its visual and interactive features, combined with gamification elements such as levels and daily goals, support vocabulary retention and foster learner motivation. Students benefited from its flexible use, allowing them to engage in consistent daily practice. However, the study also revealed significant challenges, particularly the lack of contextual usage, limited personalization of content, and misalignment with academic vocabulary needs. These limitations can hinder students' ability to apply learned vocabulary in real communication or academic settings.

Therefore, it is recommended that educators integrate Drops into formal learning environments as a supporting tool, especially in blended learning models. Lecturers should guide students in using the app by aligning vocabulary topics with course objectives and providing contextual explanations. Additionally, app developers are encouraged to enhance the platform by incorporating contextual examples and customizable content paths to better suit learners' academic and personal needs. Future researchers are advised to adopt mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to measure the long-term impact of Drops on vocabulary acquisition across diverse learner populations. Despite the use of a single instrument, the present study ensured trustworthiness through methodological rigor, offering valuable insights into students' real experiences with mobile-assisted vocabulary learning.

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