

STRUGGLING INDONESIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS GOING TO MALL: ANY SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS?

¹Iyehezkiel Parudani, ²Taufiq Effendi, ³Gita Rahmi, ⁴Syarifah Azharina Syafrudin

¹English Literature department, Faculty of Letters, Pamulang University,

¹² English Department, Faculty of Letters and Culture, Universitas Gunadarma

⁴Informatics Engineering Department, Universitas Gunadarma

¹Jl. Raya Puspitek No.46, Buaran, Serpong, Indonesia,

^{2,3,4}Jl. Margonda Raya No. 100, Depok 16424, Jawa Barat

¹yep.austin@gmail.com, ²taufiq.effendi@gmail.com, ³gitarahmi89@gmail.com,

⁴s_azharina@staff.gunadarma.ac.id

Abstract

Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) has been globally popular. Yet, experimental studies investigating the results of different treatments between additional MALL and standard MALL implementations in Indonesian university context are still understudied. This research sought to investigate the extent to which additional MALL activities as a treatment to an EFL experimental group of university students could improve their English given the limited class time and large sized classes. The subjects of this study were two second semester classes of English Literature students. The experimental class, a low-performing group, was asked to watch a youtube video twice or thrice a week in addition to the standard online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic while the controlled class, a better performing group, was not given this treatment. The findings revealed that (1) experimental students significantly improved their pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and fluency but not their formal assessment results; (2) though assigned additional MALL activities, the experimental group, due to limited financial ability for internet, spent roughly as much time as the controlled group; ((3) bad internet connection and low economic affordability contributed significantly to the less satisfactory result of MALL; (4) due to the standard online learning during the pandemic, both experimental and controlled students experienced increased exposures, enthusiasm, motivation, range of independent activities, autonomy and English ability; (5) real time students' collaboration is challenging. This study suggests that MALL somehow allows greater English improvement and autonomy development and therefore is recommended that universities and respective local governments especially in remote areas provide the necessary supports.

Keywords: *Independent learning, Assisted Language Learning (MALL), mobile distance learning, speaking skills*

INTRODUCTION

In general, the time allocated for speaking skills per semester in English study programs at Indonesian higher education is limited. Roughly 90 minutes are given in a week over a period of 16 weeks amounting to a total of 21 hours as 2 sessions in the semester are used for mid and final semester

assessment. Moreover, Indonesian university classrooms are typically large and heterogeneous which pose more challenges. This situation signifies the urgency to provide additional exposures and encourage greater autonomy to students to improve their speaking skills which can be done through the implementation of Mobile-assisted Language

Learning (MALL). MALL is a language learning method that is growing rapidly along with the increasing popularity of the use of smartphones to meet various personal, communication and work needs. In fact, MALL implementation has been a global phenomenon and reality since start of the Covid-19 pandemic. MALL popularity drove the researchers to investigate if a treatment by giving additional MALL activities outside the regular online learning sessions to low-performing students would be significantly helpful in improving their English.

The term Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) was coined by Chickering and Ehrmann in 1996 and was first used in connection with language learning by Chinnery, G. M. in 2006 (Hassan Taj et al., 2016). Actually, the findings regarding CALL or computer Assisted Language Learning that appeared long before before MALL can be used to carry out learning activities that are implemented via smart phones. This is because a smart phone is a kind of mini computer that can be put in a shirt pocket or bag and carried around easily. The main difference between CALL and MALL is the freedom given by MALL to learners which allows them to learn anytime and anywhere.

Research reports conducted on MALL show that both teachers and students' welcome MALL with great enthusiasm due to its mobility and accessibility. Teachers like it because it provides many options for delivering learning material in an attractive

way. Learners like it for the ease with which it can be used any time and anywhere as well as the possibility of working in groups. Researchers also found that assignments should be easy to execute, interesting and short and take socio-cultural settings into account. The area of language proficiency that uses MALL the most successfully is vocabulary development (Joshi & Shah, 2015). This was supported by classroom action research on the use of MALL by Darmawati (2018) to improve speaking proficiency of IT UNPAM students showed positive results seen from the post-test when compared to the pre-test.

Jansen et al. (2012) revealed that incorporating video recordings into the language learning process provides several benefits for learners by giving them opportunities to communicate interactively. Such interactive communication can foster self-confidence and independence in learning. In other words, the use of videos is able to develop learner autonomy and enables them to practice the target language in a collaborative and fun atmosphere, and motivates them to commit themselves to the learning process.

In Indonesian context, studies on MALL implementation report relatively positive results despite its typical challenges. Butarbutar et al. (2021) point out that students of the experimental group made higher performance, had greater self-study, and improved their speaking, listening, reading,

writing, vocabulary and grammar. Darsih and Asikin (2020) uncover that their university student respondents reported that they installed and used several applications i.e., Kamusku, Google translate, Elsa speak, Youtube, Zoom and Google meet, to learn English and had positive perception regarding MALL (Lizamuddin & Emzir, 2019; Yudhiantara & Saehu, 2017). This is aligned with an earlier study by Hadi and Emzir (2016) which reported a significant improvement of students' speaking skills after going through 3 cycles of an action research. Surprisingly, as simple as sending a list of words for students to learn and master prior to every class, experimental students performed significantly better than their fellows in the controlled group (Katemba, 2021). Despite the unstable internet connection, students still experienced speaking and critical thinking improvement (Kusmaryani et al., 2019). For vocational students, MALL equally provides opportunities for English learning, vocabulary enrichment, skills improvement and all this paves the development of learning autonomy (Mutiaraningrum & Nugroho, 2021). Nevertheless, MALL requires sufficient financial support which is often the case in Indonesia.

In language learning theory, exposures, internal motivation and autonomy play significant roles in ESL / EFL improvement (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007). These factors, or principles in Brown's term (2007), form as the required foundation to

advance in language learning. They will lead to what is called as a strategic investment that paves to the fruition of significant development of a foreign language. Exposures provide the necessary requirements of intensive language acquisition which is strengthened by learners' motivation and further advanced by their autonomy. This signifies the urgency for teachers to provide exposures that are interesting for students so that their motivation can increase and their autonomy can be established leading to the on-going language development and mastery. This prerequisite is offered by MALL (Chinnery, 2006;; Hassan Taj et al., 2016).

This present study sought to address one main question: To what extent can the additional MALL activities as a treatment, in comparison to the regular online learning given to the controlled group, help the students in the experimental group improve their English?

METHODS

This study was designed as quasi-experimental research. The research design chosen was a nonequivalent control group design because the researchers had to make use of existing classes. Two out of the five parallel speaking classes were selected. One class, lower-performing group, was given a treatment which was to watch a youtube video twice or thrice a week. Whereas, the controlled group, better-performing students, was not given this treatment. Yet, it is worth

noting that both classes were having an online learning during the pandemic and therefore both groups were somehow implementing MALL. The difference is that the experimental group had an additional MALL activity outside the standard online classes.

The subjects of this study were 2 (two) classes of second semester students of the English Study Program of a private university in South Tangerang, Indonesia and each class consists of 19 students. A few students were not included in the study because they did not fill out the questionnaire, did not take the test or withdrew from the class.

The data were mainly collected from formal assessments, recorded pre- and post-reading outloud assessments and questionnaires. Formal assessments are mid-term and final term oral exams administered to both groups. The experimental students, lower-performing group, and the controlled group, better-performing students, were given a number of written English conversations and asked to read them out loud. This assessment was given twice in the beginning and end of the semester, was recorded, evaluated and analysed by indicating the accuracy and inaccuracy of every word each student pronounced. Besides the assessment, a questionnaire consisting of 8 questions about their use of mobile applications and laptops to practice English and 12 statements using a five-point Likert scale about the students' experience of distance learning and

MALL were administered and analysed using an application to describe its statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from formal assessments

A comparison of the experimental students' performance on their formal assessments showed that some students experienced an increase in their scores, but statistically this increase was not significant. Some experienced a decline, even though this was only a small fluctuation. The mean increase that occurred in the final exam was 1.7 points which is insignificant on a 1-100 rating scale. The highest increase points of 4 points. The students who had a lower final exam score experienced a decrease of between 1 to 4 points. This too is a very insignificant number. When questioned about the decline, some stated that they were less comfortable with online oral exams. There were also those who stated that the internet signal that morning was unstable so that it interfered with their concentration while doing the oral test. It is necessary to think about an assessment system that is more learner friendly and an alternative plan if the internet is disconnected.

A comparison of the scores of the mid-term and final exams of the experimental and the non-experimental classes showed that the deliberate effort that had been done to encourage the experimental class to work independently on material from YouTube did not have significant effect on an increase in

their final exam. There was only 1 % difference in the scores with the experimental class receiving the higher gain in scores of 2% and the non-experimental class receiving a 1% gain.

Looking at the formal assessments' results, this present study is not in agreement with other similar inquiries. It suggests that MALL plays a little role in improving students' performance while Butarbutar et al. (2021), Lizamuddin and Emzir (2017) and Katemba (2021) reported a significant increase in students' performance due to the use of MALL. Yet, the causes of the little role are also evident in other studies where internet connection problem and students' low economic affordability contributed to the unsatisfactory result of MALL (Lizamuddin & Emzir, 2017; Kusmaryani et al., 2019).

Data from recorded pre- and post-assessments

Despite the little change on the experimental students' performance on formal assessments, this group was found to have good improvement in pronunciation and intonation, the microskills of speaking ability. The comparison between the recorded pre-assessment performance and the post-assessment performance indicated that the additional MALL activity which required experimental students to watch youtube video twice or thrice a week did play a significant role in improving the students' speaking skills. This finding resonates quite well with

similar studies conducted by Butarbutar et al. (2021), Hadi and Emzir (2016) and Katemba (2021).

Data from questionnaires

The questionnaires filled out by 38 students produced interesting data regarding the experiences of subjects following the teaching and learning process through online Distance Learning and MALL. The results of the analysis of the first part of the questionnaire shows that students reside in the JABODETABEK region except for 1 student who was back at her home in Central Java. All but 1 student have smart phones with internet packages and 24% of them also own computers or laptops that they also use for learning. However, they generally prefer to use their cell phones to participate in online classes or study independently. The average time they spend a day doing activities related to learning English on their own using an internet-connected device is between 30 minutes and 1 hour. There were 4 students who even spent more than 2 hours watching movies or other programs in English to improve their English. This activity was enjoyed by 90% of the students. Other most common activities were reading English texts, using online dictionaries, doing online English exercises and playing puzzles or games to learn languages. There were also 3 students who used songs to improve their pronunciation in English. By carrying out these activities the students felt that the most

pronounced improvements they made were in firstly, pronunciation and intonation, secondly, vocabulary and lastly fluency. This finding resonates with what Darsih and Asikin (2020), and Lizamuddin and Emzir (2017) discovered that MALL provides various independent learning activities that eventually add English exposures for students' gradual English improvement.

The results of analysis of the second part of the questionnaire generally show that after going through Online Distance learning teaching and learning half a semester or 7 weeks in general the students were satisfied with the learning process because the answers 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' to statements about the positive aspects of distance learning were relatively larger than the 'Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree' answers. However, the percentage of students who chose 'Neutral' or tended to be quite significant overall. The choice of 'Neutral' for each statement ranged from 5.2% (or 1 respondent) for statement No. 12 regarding the support from the university in Distance Learning up to 42% for statement No.9 regarding the variation of material used in the classroom. This shows that quite a significant number of them or 25% were still unsure about the effect of online distance learning process experience.

The recapitulation of part two of the questionnaire is presented in the table one. Statements regarding the teaching ability of teachers in implementing the online Distance Learning method, namely statements 5 - 9

tend to get positive answers. 47.36% of the students responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 5 The teachers are able to conduct online classes effectively while only 13% responded 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. 54.8% responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 6 Students get enough individual attention and feedback during online learning compared to 23.66% who responded disagreed. Nobody strongly disagreed. 57.6% responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 7 The material used in the online classes is effective to learn speaking skills compared to 18.3% who responded 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. 42.1% responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 8 There is enough variety in the online activities to compared to 18.3% who disagreed and strongly disagreed. However, in the comments given in this questionnaire, there were some students who mentioned that they were often very bored during the classes so that they could not concentrate during the Distance Learning session.

57.8% responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 9 Assessment (UTS & UAS) of speaking is effective compared to 10.5% who disagreed. In one of the comments a few students said that that they felt more confident doing the oral exam online as they were not directly in front of their peers. However, several of them had problems with the internet connection during their oral exam and this disrupted their concentration.

The responses to the five statements above (5 to 9) indicate that the students believed that the instructors had been successful in implementing online Distance Learning. The materials used in the online Distance learning class was the original material designed for the face-to-face classes without any change. This indicates that a lot of improvement in the material can still be made by, for example, adding variety to the virtual classroom activities.

This issue was also raised in the student comments given to question no.13, namely that in order to get rid of learners' boredom, it was necessary to include activities such as games or puzzles which were appropriate to practice speaking skills. Comments regarding the boredom experienced by the subjects were not solely due to the implementation of Distance Learning but also because of the enactment of the Large-Scale Social Distancing and New Norms.

One matter that turned out to be a significant obstacle for students was the difficulty contacting peers to discuss or practice speaking. This can be seen in statement No. 10. It is easy for students to interact with each other to support their learning online., which only received 18.4% 'agree' responses while 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses got 47.2%. This means it is necessary to think of a method that will be able to facilitate communication between students. Perhaps setting up group chat groups would give them some of the

support they need from their peers.

63.1% of the respondents responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 11. Online learning makes students become more independent learners shows that a majority of students realize that in the Distance Learning method they are required to be more active in taking responsibility for their own learning.

89.5% of the students felt that it was the university responsibility to facilitate the online Distance Learning process (statement No 12). One of the main problems was related to the substantial financial burden imposed on the students to get internet connection for all the classes they had.

This has some relation to statement No. 2 regarding the need for training for the Distance Learning method, to which 55.2% of the students responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. The students were of the opinion that the university were responsible for training the students.

Although the students' response to the ability of teachers to handle Distance Learning was generally quite positive, a majority still tended to think that face-to-face learning was more effective and enjoyable (62.7%).

The most crucial problem faced by students in online Distance Learning is having good and stable internet connection. This was stated by 83.7% of students in this study. This internet problem was caused by many reasons. Some students said that the internet

signal where they live was always weak and unstable. Several students had to leave their homes to search for a stronger signal. For some other students, this internet connection issue was related to their economic situation.

Because all courses were conducted online, they were forced to spend a lot of money to buy internet credits. There was one student who could not attend the virtual classes at least 3 times because of that problem. In the comments given to question no 13, at least 25% of the students suggested that student tuition fees be reduced so that it could be used to buy data packages.

From the questionnaires it was evident that both classes on average spend an equal amount of time on their smartphones doing language practice activities outside the virtual class i.e., 60% of both classes used their smartphones approximately 45 minutes 2-3 times a week. The class with the exposure to more YouTube videos suggested by the teacher did not spend more hours doing independent learning.

Thus, it can be concluded that Online Distance learning encourage students to be more independent learners. This is supported by the fact that 63.1% of the respondents responded 'agree' and 'strongly agree' to statement No. 11. Online learning makes students become more independent learners. This supports similar studies which highlight the increased enthusiasm, autonomy,

exposures, range of activities and English ability students in general experience with MALL (Butarbutar et al., 2021; Darmawati, 2018; Darsih & Asikin, 2020; Hadi & Emzir, 2016; Katemba, 2021; Kusmaryani et al., 2019; Lizamuddin et al., 2019; Mutiaraningrum & Nugroho, 2021; Yudhiantara & Saehu, 2019).

The study revealed an important conclusion. The implementation of MALL whether implemented as a special treatment or as a common language learning practice in contemporary Covid-19-impacted society offer valuable advantages to foreign language students. As highlighted by Brown in his theory of the principles of language learning, strategic investment as a result of exposures, internal motivation, and learning autonomy was gradually established by the implementation of MALL. In other words, MALL provides the prerequisite to help the research participants to learn independently and witness the gradual improvement of their English. If only the participants had not been stumbled by financial restrictions, they could have improved their English even more significantly.

It is therefore recommended that respective universities and local and central governments could help provide necessary supports for a more maximum MALL implementation and more maximum educational outcomes.

Table. 1 Online Distance Learning Teaching and Learning

No.	Statement	Percentage (%)				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	The main problem with online learning is having good internet connection			15.8%	44.7%	39%
2	Students need to get training to participate effectively in online learning		7.8%	34%	31.6%	23.6%
3	Online language learning is more effective than face-to-face learning	18%	44.7%	13.1%	18%	10.5%
4	Online learning must be combined with face-to-face learning		5.2%	29%	50%	15.8%
5	The teachers are able to conduct online classes effectively	7.8%	5.2%	39.45%	44.7%	2.6%
6	Students get enough individual attention and feedback during online learning		23.6%	21%	47%	7.8%
7	The material used in the online classes is effective to learn speaking skills	7.8%	10.5%	23.6%	55%	2.6%
8	There is enough variety in the online activities	7.8%	10.5%	42%	31.6%	10.5%
9	Assessment (UTS & UAS) of speaking is effective		10.5%	31.6%	50%	7.8%
10	It is easy for students to interact with each other to support their learning online.	23.6%	23.6%	31.6%	18.40%	
11	Online learning makes students become more independent learners	7.8%	13.1%	15.8%	57.9%	5.2%
12	It is necessary for the university to provide students and teachers with adequate facilities to engage in online learning	2.6%	2.6%	5.2%	57.9%	31.6%
13	Other comments about your online learning experience and/or suggestions to improve your online learning (you can write your comments/ suggestions in Indonesian)					

CONCLUSION

The additional MALL activities as a treatment to the experimental group of low-performing university students have given some positive impacts on their English, though not very significant. The students were found to have improved some aspects of their speaking skills i.e. pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. The students revealed that they experienced increased enthusiasm, learning autonomy, range of activities and exposure that led them to experience some improvement. This positive impact, however, did not necessarily enhance their performance on formal assessments to a significant extent. It turned out that one of the reasons for why the students did not score significantly better on formal assessments and could not improve more significantly was the limited opportunity to explore more on MALL. Their financial affordability to purchase more internet quota was limited so that they could not have more maximum learning and improvement. Another factor significantly contributed to this less positive result was the less supported internet connection. This frustrated them and caused them to panic and lose concentration when doing their exam which eventually led to a less satisfactory result. Despite these challenges, another finding revealed that the implementation online learning had driven both experimental and controlled groups to have preferred using their mobile phones and experienced MALL. As a result, both groups enjoyed similar

advantages that MALL had to offer. Based on these findings, it is recommended that universities as well as respective local and central governments can provide necessary supports for wider and better MALL implementations and higher educational outcomes.

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