Exploring the Affordance of 'BBC 6 Minute English' Mobile Application as an Online Supplementary Listening Tool

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ABSTRACT

Listening skills have always played an important role in English learning. Communication and improvements in English can only be established when a certain level of proficiency is achieved. Therefore, it is important for all English learners to reach the required level. Nowadays, with advanced technology, learners can make use of many digital tools to improve their listening skills. Apart from the Internet and other applications for computers, English learners can also use their mobile devices as an alternative option to improve their listening skills thanks to a large number of software developed for these devices. An example of a mobile application for this purpose is "BBC 6 Minute English" developed by Kavin.flee. This study was conducted to explore the possibility of integrating this application in the students' education process and examine if there were any problems in using this software. This study was carried out on sophomores of the English Department of the University of Foreign Languages Studies (UFL) – University of Danang (UDN), Vietnam. The study also considers the impact of the use of the application on the sophomores' listening skills.

Keywords: listening skill, digital tools, mobile learning

INTRODUCTION

Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been around and developed together with computer technology ever since the 1960s (Beatty, 2003). Initially, CALL programs originated from the audio-lingual method and were, comparatively only alternate options for what could be easily done with pen and paper. The programs of that time were also deemed as conservative and unimaginative. However, with the advent of the Internet, CALL started taking its first steps out of language experiments and into the world. Since the Internet allowed CALL to be used as a method to engage language learners in communicative tasks outside of the classroom, many recent studies on CALL have focussed on learners' self-study or in particular, distance-learning. In the last decade, with the increase use of mobile devices, the potential of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has been taken into consideration. MALL allows students to gain access to

their language learning materials and contact their teachers or classmates whenever and wherever needed. With such flexibility, MALL has opened new directions in CALL and showed the possibility of exceeding all non-mobile CALL.

Following the trend, more and more students in Vietnam have started using mobile devices for language learning purposes and it has become increasingly popular among students of the English Department of UFL-UDN. However, the use of mobile devices has not been as widely integrated into the teaching and learning process. Little consideration has been given to see how mobile learning can be utilised to improve students' English learning progress in the context of this university.

To reach a certain level of fluency in a foreign language in general and English in particular, the listening skill is undoubtedly one of the most important to be mastered. In fact, it is said to be the most frequently employed skill among the four language skills (Jou, 2010). In Lu's study (2008), 93.8% of the students agree that listening is more important than the other three skills. However, most teachers only focus on writing and reading skills before college so most students are unaware of how they should develop this skill (Jou, 2010). In 2007, Kenny (2007: 105) suggested that information and communications technologies (ICT) could help learners control their own learning while teachers could individualize their teaching. With that being said, MALL, as a method that focuses on learners' self study that offers high flexibility, could be considered an appropriate method for teaching and learning listening skills.

In addition, in the English Department, UFL-UDN, Vietnam listening is a subject with only two periods per week. With such a small amount of time spent on this subject, sophomores cannot be good at listening through homework and materials used during their first year alone. As a result, they find other sources of knowledge and most of these sources come from the Internet. However, a laptop or a computer might be too expensive for a portion of students, especially those who live far from their home since they have to consider their daily expenses, tuition fees and other kinds of bills. A smart mobile device, on the other hand, is affordable to most students since it only costs about half the price of a computer. Therefore, it would be beneficial to most students in general and sophomores in particular if their mobile devices can be exploited as a learning resource.

However, despite the popularity and potential of M-learning and the importance of the listening skill, most of the sophomores of the English Department of UFL only know how to look up new words from the dictionary in their mobile devices. Therefore, this study will focus on how to make use of a mobile application to enhance the listening skills of the second year students of this school. Due to the popularity of the Android operating system in mobile technology and the reliability of the BBC channel, the chosen application is "BBC 6 Minute English" developed by Kavin.flee available on Android devices.

LISTENING IN LEARNING

According to Ausra (2012), listening is one of the most basic areas of communication skills and language development and much of the educational process is based on skills in listening. In a class, students have to spend most of the time listening to what a teacher says, for example, during a lecture. As a result, listening plays an important role in the development of other language skills. Baker (1971: 35) says that listening can also help learners build vocabulary, develop language usage and improve language efficiency. Furthermore, developing proficiency in listening comprehension is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking (Dunkel, 1986). It is also said that listening develops faster than the other three skills and can affect reading and writing abilities (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Vandergrift, 1997).

In short, listening is an important part of learning, and in developing and obtaining a new language, particularly English. It is not only the basis of other skills but also one of the channels through which learners can communicate with the target language and its culture (Curtain et al. 1988: 89).

MOBILE LEARNING AND MOBILE APPLICATIONS

Mobile Learning

Early generations of mobile learning often proposed formally-designed activities, carefully crafted by educators and technologists using emerging technology that was not widely spread (Agnes, Hulme & Shield, 2008). Currently, with the popularity of mobile and wireless devices, learners can take the lead and engage in activities suitable for their personal needs and circumstances thanks to the greater mobility (Kukulska- Hulme, Traxler & Pettit, 2007; Pettit & Kulsaka-Hulme, 2007). Typically, mobile learning is identified both by being available "anytime, anywhere" (Geddes, 2004) and by the tool used: mobile devices. 'Mobile learning' also refers to learning mediated through handheld or portable devices and potentially being available anytime, anywhere. Such learning may be formal or informal (Agnes et al., 2008).

Definition of Mobile Applications

According to the Mobile Marketing Association (2008), mobile applications consist of software that runs on a mobile device and performs certain tasks for the user of a mobile device.

The Association also states that these applications are also known as downloadable and are common on most phones, including inexpensive, entry-level models. Their wide

use is due to the many functions they perform, from basic telephony and messaging services to advance services such as games and videos.

Mobile Applications in Learning

With the appearance of the iTunes Apps Store in 2008, a large number of applications were developed for the iPhone, from games and utilities to instant messaging and word processing (Godwin-Jones, 2008: 5). Yet, Godwin-Jones (2008: 5) also noted that only a few apps for language learning had been released, including dictionaries, phrasebooks and flash cards. The main reason that led to the popularity of these few language references and practice apps is due to the simplified presentation needed for mobile devices (Godwin-Jones, 2008: 5).

Three years later, Godwin-Jones pointed out that newer hardware and software had allowed enhanced functionality (Godwin-Jones, 2011: 4). In his discussion on mobile apps for language learning, Godwin-Jones (2011: 4) had experienced several reviewed and blog-listed applications. Since not all of them were of the highest quality, he briefly discussed the best and most popular developers for language apps such as Word reference, a dictionary app, and Quizlet, a vocabulary flashcard app, among others.

Aside from applications specifically designed for educational purposes, Godwin-Jones (2011: 5) also distinguished a new category of apps called "repurposed apps" – general purpose applications that can be used for language learning, including e-mail, audio recording, and games. Android's "Talk to me" and "Listen and Speak" are two typical apps with voice recognition functions.

ANDROID OPERATING SYSTEM AND 'BBC 6 MINUTE ENGLISH'

Android Operating System

Android is an open-source mobile operating system that is supported by Google Corporation. The major reason for the pervasive adoption of Android in the mobile market is that mobile applications developed through Android development technology are more efficient and effective compared to those of other technologies such as Windows Phone and Symbian operating systems, producing fast, user friendly and appealing applications. With the rapid advancement in mobile technology, students can now seek informal education through applications in their smart phones (Hanafi, 2012).

A General Look on "BBC 6 Minute English" Application

This application was chosen for two main reasons. First, it provides users with a lot of different topics with subtitles and transcripts to improve their listening skill. Second, it is the mobile version of the famous "BBC 6 Minute English" web tool. As a result, this software's reliability is ensured.
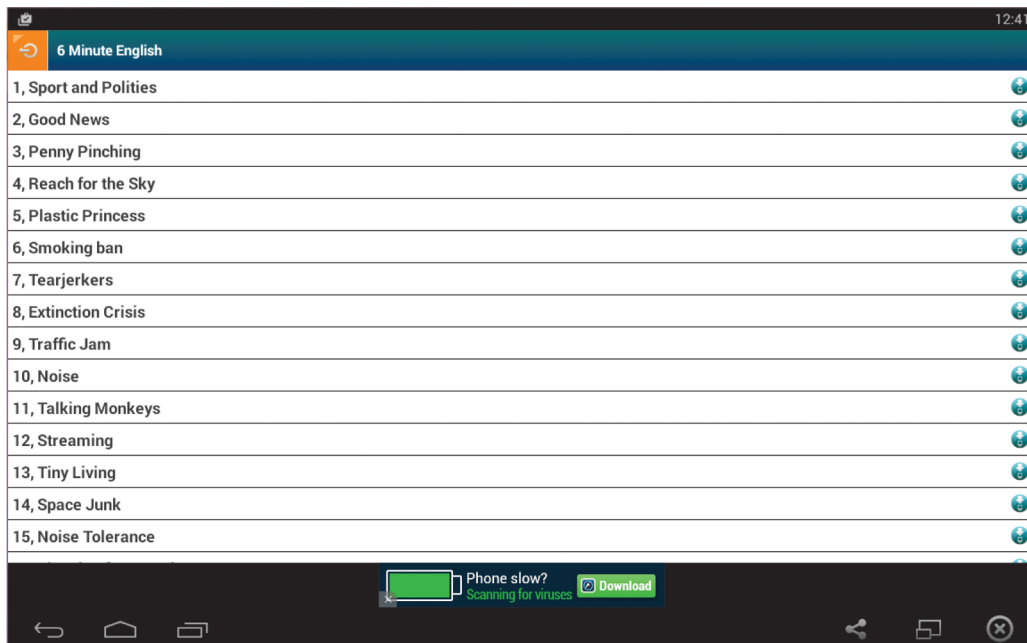

Figure 1 Main screen of "BBC 6 Minute English" on a mobile device

This software can be downloaded from the Google Play Store. It provides users with twenty eight audio tracks with different topics. All of them are downloadable and all come with a transcript for listeners to review. At the end of each topic, the speakers also review new words that are mentioned in the talk.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study mainly focuses on the impact of "BBC 6 Minute English" on improving the listening skills of sophomores at the English Department, UFL-UDN, Vietnam. This is because the second year at college is the time when students need to equip themselves with study skills to succeed in the upcoming years. One of these skills is self-study, an important skill for which a mobile application would be a great support. Secondly, due to time limitation, the study does not concentrate on teaching English with said application.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How does "BBC 6 Minute English" impact sophomores?

- What are the factors affecting the effectiveness of using this application to improve the listening skill of sophomores?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is designed to examine the effect that "BBC 6 Minute English" has on improving learners' listening skills. Choosing sophomores as research subjects, some limits were placed on the design of this study. For example, with regards to the length of the study, all participants were asked to use "BBC 6 Minute English" for two months. The study is multi-method since both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilised. The hypotheses were tested with the help of questionnaires and tests. Finally, all the collected data was analysed in a qualitatively and quantitatively.

DESCRIPTION OF POPULATION AND SAMPLE

In order to collect data for the research, the researcher selected a sample of sophomores. Eighty sophomore students whose major is English at UFL-UDN formed the sample of the study. All of these second year students were randomly chosen and each of them possessed at least one mobile device with the Android operating system to ensure the same software was downloaded and installed. Sophomores were selected as research subjects because they had passed the initial stage of college and had obtained a more advanced level of English proficiency compared to freshmen.

DATA COLLECTION

Since most of the students chosen were not familiar with the "BBC 6 Minute English" application, data collection was divided into two stages: before students had used the application and after they had used it. In addition, in the first stage, the author delivered a brief talk and distributed handouts that presented an overview of mobile learning, the Android operating system and the "BBC 6 Minute English" application. Instructions on how to use the application was also presented.

INSTRUMENTS OF DATA COLLECTION

Questionnaires and tests were used as instruments for this research. The pre–usage questionnaire consisted of personal information, students' methods of self-study on listening, skills in using mobile devices and students' attitudes towards applying mobile applications in studying listening. The post-usage questionnaire, which was carried out two months later, consists of students' first impressions about the "BBC 6 Minute English" application, students' self-study of listening with the application, students' assessment of the application, and once again, their attitudes towards using the application in studying the listening. Besides the questionnaires, a listening test was designed to evaluate students. It consisted of two sub-parts: a pre-use test and a post-use test.

DATA ANALYSIS

The process of data analysis of both stages of the research was primarily "content analysis". All data gained were read several times and as the analysis proceeded, themes related to the research questions were modified to reflect categories emerging from the data. The themes were then interpreted and categorised into major areas. Careful attention was also given to any modification of emergent themes so that an iterative process was established. Finally, the outcomes were written in descriptive, interpretative, and analytical ways (Patton, 1990). These are presented in percentage distribution tables.

FINDINGS

1. How does "BBC 6 Minute English" impact the sophomores?

This part is divided into such three parts: the impact on listening skills, the impact on learners' attitudes, and the impact on the duration of learning the listening skills.

The Impact of "BBC 6 Minute English" on Listening Skills

On being questioned whether the "BBC 6 Minute English" application was helpful in improving listening or not, 72 students answered "Yes" and 8 students answered "No". Students who answered "Yes" were required to rate the effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English" on the skill. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 The effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English" on listening skills rated by students

Scale	Listening		Total
	Frequency	Percentage	
To a great extent	20	27.8	
Somewhat	42	58.3	72
Very little	10	13.8	

Based on the data in Table 1, the first impact of "BBC 6 Minute English" is that it helps develop listening skills. Although data from the tests do not corroborate this assertion, using this software is still recognised as an effective method by 66.25% of participants in Table 2.

Table 2 Students' attitudes towards "BBC 6 Minute English" in the second stage

Statement	Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Applying "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application is an effective way to improve listening skill.	(1) Strongly disagree	0	0	
	(2) Disagree	3	3.75	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	24	30.00	80
	(4) Agree	43	53.75	
	(5) Strongly agree	10	12.50	
It does not require a high level of mobile devices understanding to apply "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application in studying Listening	(1) Strongly disagree	5	6.25	
	(2) Disagree	22	27.50	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	25	31.25	80
	(4) Agree	23	28.75	
	(5) Strongly agree	5	6.25	
It takes a lot of time when applying "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application to improve listening skill.	(1) Strongly disagree	5	6.25	
	(2) Disagree	46	57.50	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	20	25.00	80
	(4) Agree	8	10	
	(5) Strongly agree	1	1.25	
"BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application motivates students to study harder	(1) Strongly disagree	3	3.75	
	(2) Disagree	5	6.25	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	28	35	80
	(4) Agree	41	51.25	
	(5) Strongly agree	3	3.75	

Applying "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application is a method more preferable than books and CDs to improve listening skill to Vietnamese students	(1) Strongly disagree	2	2.5	
	(2) Disagree	17	21.25	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	44	55	80
	(4) Agree	15	18.75	
	(5) Strongly agree	2	2.5	
It is not necessary to practise listening skill with "BBC 6 Minute English"	(1) Strongly disagree	16	20	
	(2) Disagree	21	26.25	
	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	30	37.5	80
	(1) Agree	10	12.5	
	(2) Strongly agree	3	3.75	

This number is much higher than the number of those with opposing opinions (3.75%). Furthermore, from Table 1, it is clear that 72 students (90%) agree that "BBC 6 Minute English" is helpful for their study on listening to a certain extent. Besides this, this application helps students to practise listening in a variety of ways. The students can replay the soundtracks multiple times to get used to native speakers' pronunciation. With the subtitles and the transcripts, the students can also learn new words by memorising the spelling on the screen with the appropriate pronunciation, which will lead to easier meaning grasping in listening comprehension in the future. With the variety of topics provided, learners can also learn many things from the talks.

The Impact of "BBC 6 Minute English" on Students' Attitudes towards Applying Mobile Applications

In general, students show no clear opinion of which method they prefer in improving their listening skills. However, their attitudes towards applying mobile applications changed in some ways after using "BBC 6 Minute English" for two months.

First, in the pre-use questionnaire, no students strongly disagree with the idea that applying mobile application is time consuming. However, 5 students are strongly against the statement that "BBC 6 Minute English" is time consuming. Second, no students strongly agree with the statement that "applying mobile applications motivate students to study harder" in the pre-use questionnaire. Yet, 3 students are strongly in favour of the idea that "BBC 6 Minute English" motivates students to study harder. Since "BBC 6 Minute English" is an application itself, the positive responses it receives might be a good sign for other mobile applications since people will start thinking about the effectiveness of other learning mobile applications after having a good time with "BBC 6 Minute English". Moreover, when asked whether "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile

application is more preferable than books and CDs or not, most students (55%) responded with "Neither agree nor disagree" and the portion of students who are in favour of books and CDs is 23.75%, only slightly higher than that of students who prefer "BBC 6 Minute English" (21.25%). This suggests that most students are still considering the advantages of a mobile application like "BBC 6 Minute English" when comparing it to traditional methods such as books and CDs.

The impact of "BBC 6 Minute English" on the duration of listening self-study

After using "BBC 6 Minute English", the number of students who spent 3 to 5 hours a week to practise listening increased from 28 to 37. Therefore, it can be concluded that "BBC 6 Minute English" encourages students to spend more time on practising listening as it can be seen from Table 2 where 55% of students agree that "BBC 6 Minute English" motivates learners to study harder.

2. What are the factors affecting the effectiveness of using this application to improve the sophomores' listening skills?

There are two main factors which will be discussed.

Subjective Factors

First, the poor effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application use comes from learners' negative attitudes. Students' first impression about this tool is as follows.
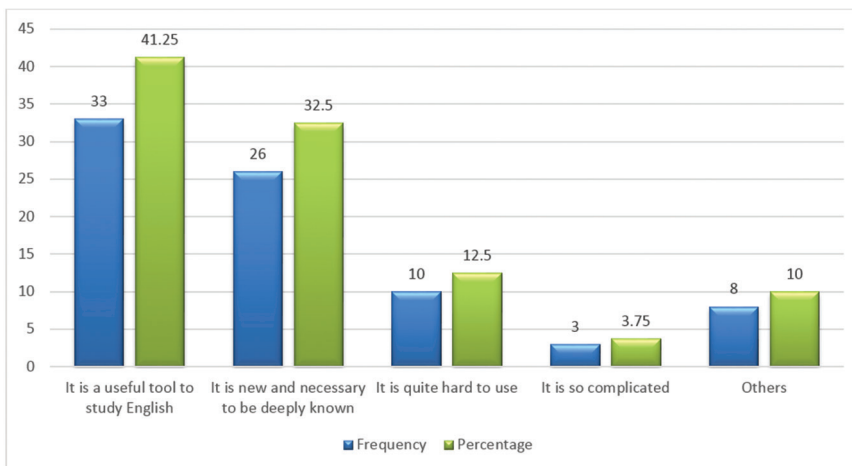

Figure 2 Students' first impression about introduced "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application

From the chart, it can be seen that a portion of learners (16.25%) conclude that the software is too hard to use or too complicated. Five students claim that "BBC 6 Minute English" is not as effective as other sources despite not having used it before, and out of the five, three of these students obtained a lower score in their second listening test compared to the first; the other two showed no improvement in their scores.

Second, the frequency of using the software is also a factor affecting the effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English".
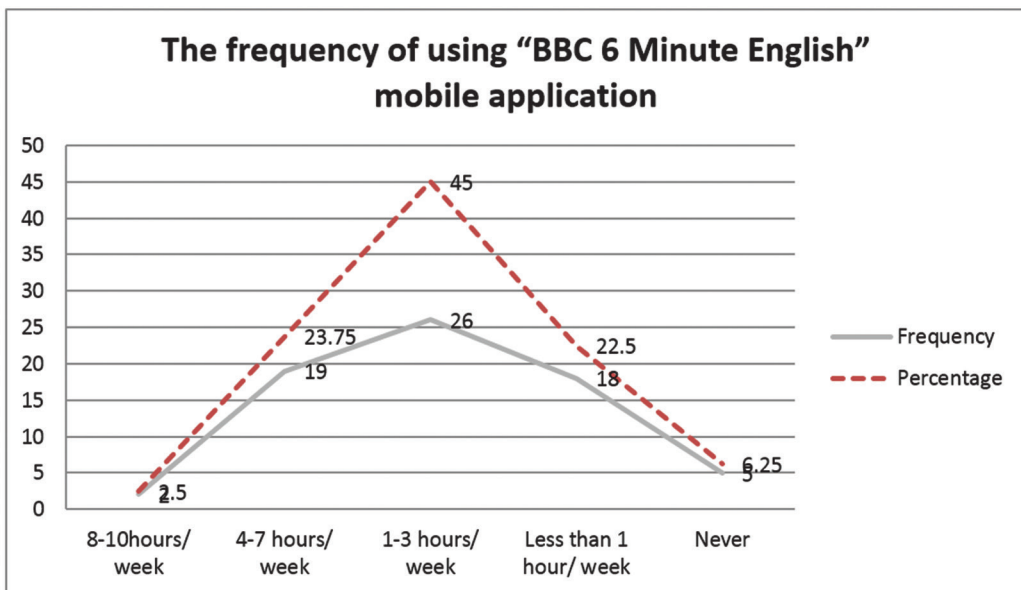

Figure 3 The frequency of using "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application

According to Chart 2, only two students practise using "BBC 6 Minute English" from 8 to 10 hours a week. Interestingly, these two students later obtained a significantly better score in the second test compared to the first. The majority of students (45%) only use this application between 1 to 3 hours a week. These students make up 40% of those who only attained a slightly better score in the second test while 32% showed no improvement. There are also 18 students who practise less than 1 hour a week with the software. 60% of those who obtained a lower score in the second test consisted of these students. Therefore, the researcher believes it is safe to conclude that the more times the learners practised with the software, the larger the benefits gained.

Last but not least, students' skills in using mobile devices also affect the effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English". From Table 2, we can see that 33.75% of students state that using "BBC 6 Minute English" requires a high level of mobile device

understanding and 97% of these students are from the groups of students with poor or fair mobile devices using skills in Table 3.

Table 3 Students' skills in using mobile devices

Score	Frequency	Percentage	Total
From 7 to 13	11	13.75	
From 14 to 20	36	45	80
From 21 to 27	25	31.25	
From 28 to 35	8	10	

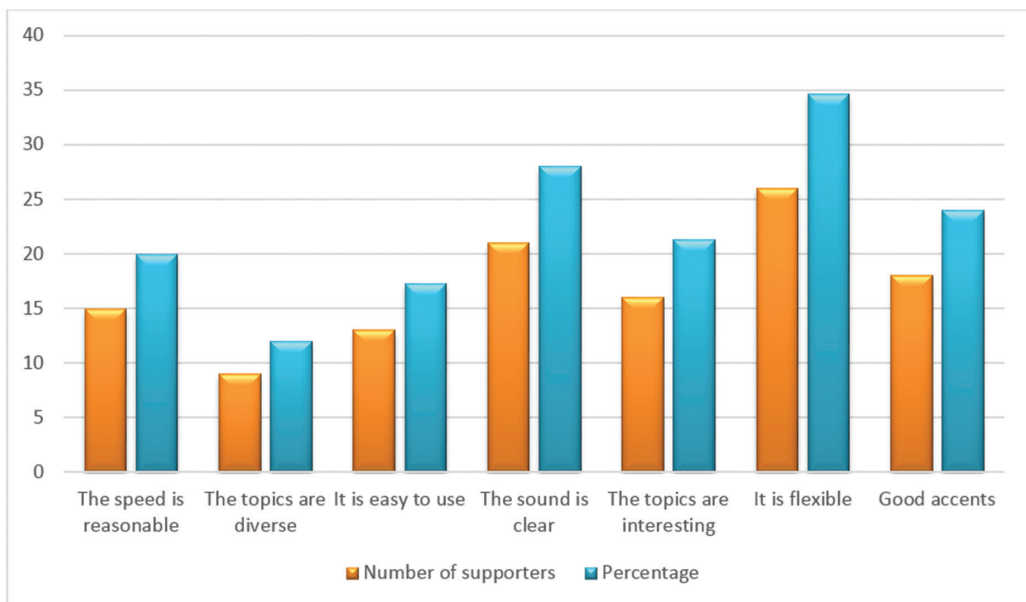Figure 3 shows the good points of 'BBC 6 Minute English'.

Figure 4 Good points of "BBC 6 Minute English"

In this chart, the simplicity of the software is one of the good points listed by users and 35% of participants agree that "BBC 6 Minute English" does not require a high level of mobile devices understanding. In conclusion, the problems are mainly from the users' mobile devices using skill, not the complexity of the software.

Objective Factors

The ineffectiveness of the software might also come from its own limitations.

Table 4 Bad points of "BBC 6 Minute English"

Bad point	Number of critics	Percentage	Total of user
1. The speed of some audio is too fast	7	9.3	
2. It is difficult to use	6	8	
3. The speed of downloading is too slow	20	26.7	
4. The quality of audio is not high	13	17.3	75
5. Its topics are limited	15	20	
6. It is time – consuming	5	6.7	
7. It is not updated	5	6.7	

As seen in Table 4, 20% of the users think that the number of topics is limited and they sometimes feel tired of practising the same topics repeatedly. This problem might be due to the limited resources of a mobile device.

Another considerable limitation listed in Table 4 is the download speed. 26.7% of users complain that some of the audio clips take too much time to finish downloading and this slowness makes them frustrated. However, this problem might not just be the software's fault alone but it might also be because of the poor Internet connection at that moment.

SUMMARY

Thanks to the data collected from the questionnaires and the tests, students' learning of listening with "BBC 6 Minute English" can be viewed from various angles. Clearly, the data shows that the use of "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application has some effects on students. The factors affecting the effectiveness of using "BBC 6 Minute English" to improve listening skill has been pointed out so that we should reconsider them to search for solutions.

CONCLUSION

The study was carried out to investigate the impact of using the "BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application on the listening skills of sophomores of the Department of English of UFL-UDN. Furthermore, it aimed to explain the possible factors influencing the

effectiveness of "BBC 6 Minute English". From the data analysis and interpretation, some following fundamental conclusions can be drawn.

Mobile learning is a potential method of language learning due to the flexibility of mobile devices allowing it to be utilised anytime and anywhere. The advanced technology available allows students to access resources from the Internet through a mobile device instead of using an expensive laptop or computer. With the development of mobile operating systems, a lot of language learning applications have been created. Due to its accessibility, Android is one of the most prominent operating systems of mobile devices and there are a lot of language learning applications that operate on this system. However, in the context of UFL-UDN most students only use mobile devices for dictionaries instead of exploiting the full potential of a mobile device through other applications.

"BBC 6 Minute English" mobile application on the Android operating system does help students improve their listening skills and its effectiveness is confirmed by many students. After having a clearer view about this mobile application, students using "BBC 6 Minute English" in learning listening do not require a high level of mobile devices using skills. However, as with the development of any skill, the investment of time in practice is crucial. Although the majority of students conclude that using "BBC 6 Minute English" in practising listening skills is an effective method and it is necessary to practise with it, they are still unsure if this method is more preferable than more traditional methods such as books and CDs.

Nothing happens without any cause and so it is with this case. With regards to the ineffectiveness of using "BBC 6 Minute English", the researcher realises that it is caused by some factors. Firstly, students cannot improve their skills because of their negative attitudes towards this application. Next, their infrequent of use of the software and their limited mobile devices using skills are also considerable factors. Additionally, there are also obstacles coming from the software's own limitations.

In order to use "BBC 6 Minute English" effectively, students should have a positive attitude towards this software. They should be eager to use the tools so that they can put in real effort and not give up when they have difficulties. Judgments should be made only after trying the application for some time. Secondly, we realise that students need to practice with "BBC 6 Minute English" frequently. The more they practise, the easier it is for them to use the tools and the more effective the tools are. This also helps them improve their mobile devices using skills as well. They can search reviews about the software and read its tutorial on Internet so that they will not be overwhelmed at the first time of use. Another way is that they can make friends with other users and ask them for useful advice.

However the point is that it is not easy to make students willing to use the software. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to encourage students to use it. Teachers can

review the software and give students advice during class time. Since students always put their trust in their teachers' abilities as well as experiences, the review of teachers will be more reliable and convincing.

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