

# Towards the Use of Mobile Phones for Learning English as a Foreign Language: Hesitation or Welcome?

Tri Hoang Dang, M.A. in Applied Linguistics

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:10 October 2013

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## Abstract

Mobile language learning refers to the use of mobile devices including mobile phones and other means of wireless communication for language learning. In spite of its infancy, it has drawn many researchers and educators' attention for its potential contributions to education in general and language learning in particular. This study investigated learners' previous experience and attitudes towards the use of mobile phones for English language learning in the future in a sample of 76 Vietnamese English majors at Hoa Sen University. The data of the study were collected from the questionnaire survey, and entered into SPSS, and then descriptive statistics was calculated. The findings revealed that the vast majority of students had used their mobile phones for general educational purposes and English learning. In addition, participants showed their clear positive attitudes towards the use of mobile phones to study English in the future in that vocabulary, listening and reading are the three skills most of learners would like to acquire via their mobile phones.

## Introduction

The development of science and technology has made great contributions to the advent of mobile technologies in recent years (Fujimoto, 2012). It cannot be denied that these mobile technologies made up of mobile phones, tablet computers, and other means of wireless communication change how we live, work, and socialize by allowing us to carry out a variety of daily tasks such as checking email, listening to music, playing games, chatting to friends via social networking, and so on (Pollara, 2011). In addition to the above mentioned benefits, the question arises as to whether mobile devices, especially mobile phones take the potential to contribute to education in general and language learning in particular.

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The fact that there might be some hesitation as well as doubt towards the adoption of mobile devices for educational purposes is conceivable. First and foremost, teachers and educators fear that students can use these devices to perform non-learning activities which can cause distraction to them, and even worse do the cheating in examinations. Furthermore, they express concern over how to manage students' learning process, and assess and evaluate their academic performance fairly and accurately. However, these drawbacks seem to be minimal, without discouraging researchers and educators from paying their attention to benefits that mobile devices bring to learners. Henceforth, the past several years have witnessed a number of investigations ranging from perceptual to experimental research studies on the use and efficacy of mobile phones, iPods, personal digital assistants, and MP3 players on language learning (Fujimoto, 2012; Pollara, 2011; Anaraki, 2008; Stockwell, 2010; Chen & Cheung, 2008; Belanger, 2005). Such studies help justify the merits of these mobile devices as effective learning tools in various educational contexts.

Although much attention has been paid to mobile language learning in many countries around the world, there are no studies conducted within the Vietnamese context. Thus, this current study fills this gap and contributes to the literature by carrying out an inquiry into students' experience and attitudes towards using mobile phones for educational and English language learning purposes. The study also explores more detailed information as to what English skills and subs-skills students would like to acquire on their mobile phones.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore for what educational and English language learning purposes students use their mobile phones, and how they perceive the adoption of mobile phones for English language learning. The objectives were raised as follows:

1. To investigate students' experience of using mobile phones for educational purposes.
2. To explore students' experience of using mobile phones for learning English
3. To find out whether students would like to use mobile phones to study English in the future or not.

4. To determine what English skills and sub-skills students would like to learn on mobile phones.

## **Research Questions**

The study attempts to address the following questions:

1. Have students ever used mobile phones for learning purposes in general? If so, what learning purposes have they ever used mobile phones for?
2. Have students ever used mobile phones for learning English? If so, what English learning purposes have they ever used mobile phones for?
3. What are students' attitudes towards the use of mobile phones for English language learning in the future?
4. What English skills and sub-skills would students like to learn on mobile phones?

## **Literature Review**

### **Definition**

Mobile language learning is defined as the use of mobile devices including mobile phones and other means of wireless communication for language learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). As mentioned earlier, although it is still in its infancy it has drawn attention to many researchers and educators because of its “mobility” for learners. That is to say, mobile learning provides learners with flexibility to study anywhere, anytime provided that they have their mobile devices. Therefore, this is a potential contribution to language learning.

### **Previous Studies on Mobile Phones and English Language Learning**

The study on students' perceptions of mobile language learning in Australia by Fujimoto (2012) showed that learners, in general, expressed their positive attitude towards the use of mobile phones and tablet computers for language learning. Similarly, White and Mills (2012) conducted the survey on Japanese university students' attitudes to the use of smart phones for language education. The results indicated that these students had a positive view of smart phone technology for educational purposes and language learning in the classroom setting.

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Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) put it in their study that mobile phones brought several advantages to the students. First, the technology provided them with flexibility, being able to gain access to learning content at any time from any location. Second, mobile phones helped them to learn more new words. What is more, Wang, Shen, Novak and Pan (2009) who carried out the study on the use of text messages via mobile phones for educational purposes concluded that the technology made a shift to learners, from “passive learners to active learners.”

These investigations have shown learners’ positive views of mobile phones for its use in language education. However, the negative attitudes were also identified in several other research studies. Stockwell’s (2010) study showed, for instance, that the majority of participants preferred to use the personal computer to the mobile phone for vocabulary activities, 60% of students not using the latter for the vocabulary activities, with just 1.7% using the latter for all of the vocabulary activities. The study found that students blamed for “cost, screen size and difficulty inputting data” as the reasons they elected to use the computer platform over the mobile phone. Likewise, Motiwalla’s (2007) study also indicated learners’ dissatisfaction to the mobile phone interface because of its “small screen, slow connection speed, time-consuming typing, and low quality of visual materials”.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

Seventy six second-year English major students from four intact classes at Hoa Sen University took part in the study. At the time of research, all of the participants were following the courses of advanced business English 2, TOEIC, Reading and Grammar 2, and academic writing. The lecturers who were in charge of these classes agreed to help the researcher administer the questionnaire survey to their students during class time.

### ***Instrumentation***

The questionnaire instrument was used for data collection in the current study. The questionnaire survey was designed and adapted from Fujimoto (2012). It was composed of ten questions which were designed in the Yes-No, and open-ended question format, covering the

detailed information to answer the aforementioned research questions. The data collected from the questionnaires which had been administered to the students were entered into SPSS, and then descriptive statistics was calculated.

## Results and Discussion

The results indicated that 100% of learners owned mobile phones. When asked if learners owned a smart phone, 72% responded “Yes” whereas 28% responded “No”. It is worth noting from the findings that there is a great demand for the use of mobile phones among students and there are more smart phones in use than traditional ones as showed in Table 1 below.

Mobile phone ownership	Percentage
Smart phones	72%
Traditional mobile phones	28%
Total	100%

Table 1: Mobile phone ownership

***Research question 1: Have students ever used mobile phones for learning purposes in general? If so, what learning purposes have they ever used mobile phones for?***

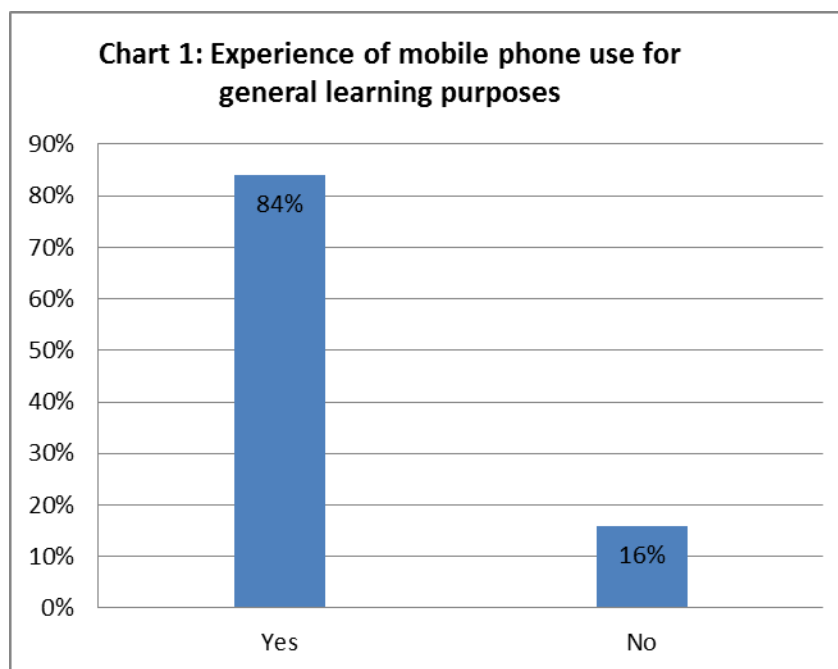
This question asked about the participants’ prior experience of mobile phone use for general learning purposes. The bar chart 1 indicates that the vast majority of the learners had used their mobile phones for educational purposes, reaching 84%. As can be seen from Table 2, there are seven educational activities that learners had used their mobile phones for, namely, dictionaries, access to the university website, learning material search, course registration, reading online books, course outline download, and note-taking.

General Learning Purposes	Response Percentage	
	Yes	No
Dictionaries	88%	12%
Access to the university website	70%	30%
Learning material search	68%	32%
Course registration	43%	57%

Reading online books	43%	57%
Course outline download	38%	62%
Note-taking	4%	96%

Table 2: Mobile phone use for general learning purposes

The findings reveal that the three most frequent learning activities were looking up new words in the dictionary (88%), gaining access to the university website (70%), and searching for learning material on the internet (66%) respectively. Well over 40% of students had used their mobile phones for signing up for courses, and reading books on the internet, and just under 40% downloading the course outline. However, mobile phone use for taking notes of learning points received the lowest proportion (4%).



***Research question 2: Have students ever used mobile phones for learning English? If so, what English learning purposes have they ever used mobile phones for?***

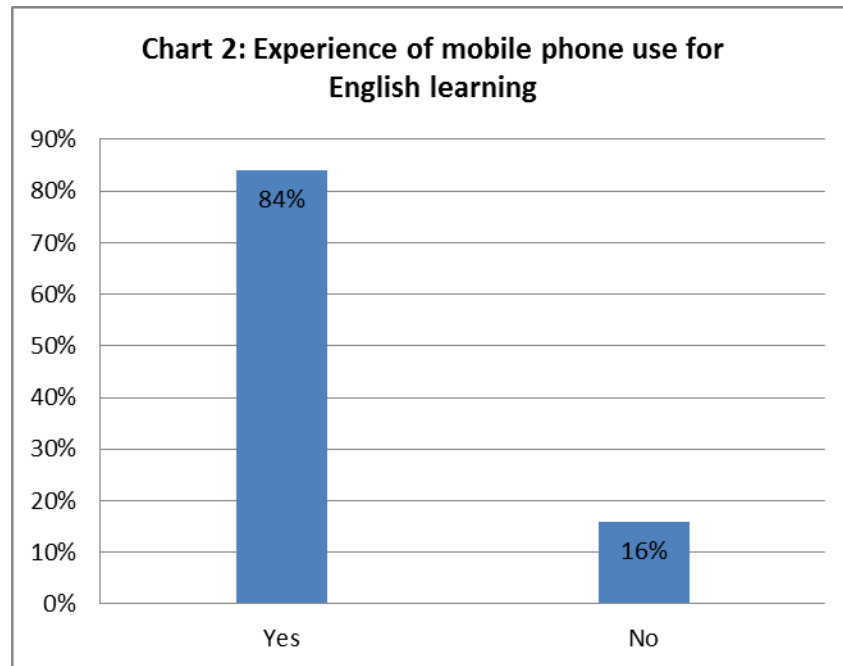
The results show that 84% of learners had had the experience of using their mobile phones for learning English as shown in chart 2, sharing the same percentage of learners with

general educational purposes mentioned above. It is noticeable that there is a growing tendency for students to make good use of their mobile phones for learning activities.

Table 3 below lists the details of mobile phone use for English learning purposes. The greatest percentage of learners (85%) had used their mobile phones to look up new words in the dictionary, followed by 62% using their mobile phones to study vocabulary. More than half of learners had used applications to learn English and listened to English audio files through mobile phones whereas hardly anyone had done English exercises via mobile phones.

English Learning Purposes	Response Percentage	
	Yes	No
To use a dictionary	85%	15%
To learn vocabulary	62%	38%
To use English learning applications	54%	46%
To listen to English audio files	53%	47%
To do English exercises	1.3%	98.7%

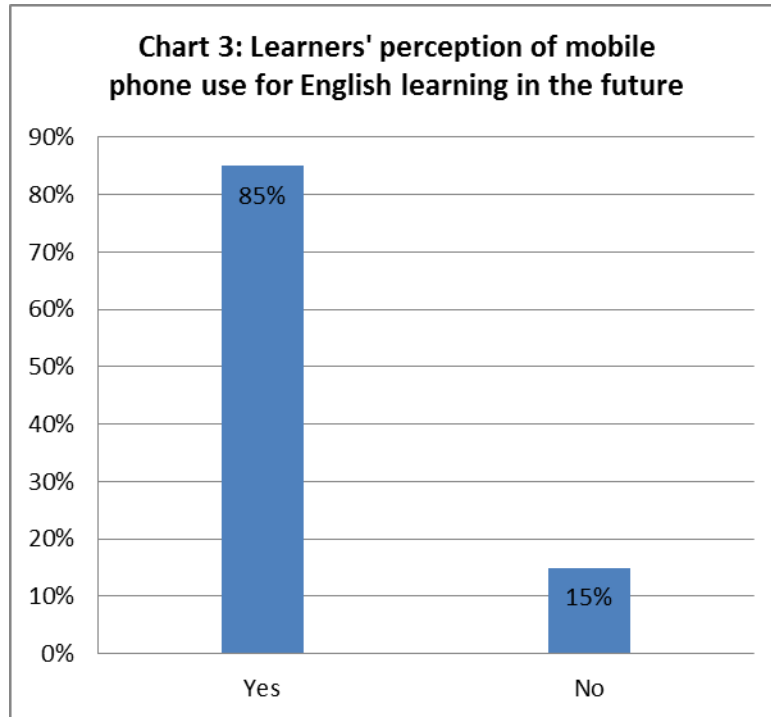
Table 3: Mobile phone use for English Learning Purposes



***Research Question 3: What are students' attitudes towards the use of mobile phones for English language learning in the future?***

This question asked students about their perception of mobile phone use in the future. The results reveal that students showed a positive attitude towards the use of mobile phones to study English in the future (85%). This finding had the same proportion of learners who said that they have had prior experience of using mobile phones to learn English as illustrated in Chart 2.





***Research Question 4: What English skills and sub-skills would students like to learn on mobile phones?***

This research question involved students' expectations of using their mobile phones to acquire skills and sub-skills in English. As can be seen from Table 4, vocabulary and listening attracted the most attention from learners, reaching 88% and 79% respectively, followed by reading (66%) and grammar (61%). Nonetheless, not more than 50% of learners would like to study speaking and writing skills on their mobile phones.

Skills / Sub-skills	Response Percentage	
	Yes	No
Vocabulary	88%	12%
Listening	79%	21%
Reading	66%	34%
Grammar	61%	39%

Speaking	45%	55%
Writing	41%	59%

Table 4: Mobile phone use for English skills/sub-skills

According to the research findings, the number of learners used more smart phones than traditional ones, the former reaching 72% while the latter standing at 28%. Therefore, it can be inferred that those who owned a smart phone would have more advantages to educational and English language learning over those with traditional ones. The benefits that smart phones bring to learners motivate them to use such purposes. That is the reason why there was the high percentage of students (85%) who showed their clear positive attitudes towards the use of mobile phones to study English in the future in that vocabulary and listening skills received the most attention from them.

However, there were also a small number of participants (15%) who expressed their negative attitudes to mobile phone use for English language learning in the future. This can be interpreted that these learners did not own smart phones, or they may not have had prior experience of using mobile phones for such purposes (Fujimoto, 2012). Thus, in order to maximize mobile learning at anytime from any location, learners should be encouraged and instructed how to use mobile phones for English language learning. If so, learning is not confined to the classroom setting any longer, it moves out of the classroom boundary, giving learners the opportunity to study at anytime from any location.

## Conclusion

This study was designed to explore learners' experience and attitudes to mobile phone use for English language learning. The findings indicated that the vast majority of students had used their mobile phones to study English. Also, they expressed their welcome towards using this technology to study English in the future. Although this is just an exploratory study on learners' perceptions, it provides teachers and educators in Vietnam with useful information regarding a novel teaching and learning method. Furthermore, it is hoped to change their negative attitude towards the use of mobile phone learning in the classroom setting and receive

their welcome and readiness for the adoption of this new technology to English language learning.

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