The Use of CAKE Mobile Application Among ESL Undergraduate Students in the ODL Programme

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Abstract: The use of technology has become an essential part of modern education. This study explored the impact of the CAKE mobile app on the speaking skills learning experiences of Online Distance Learning (ODL) students and investigated their perceptions of the app. This is a qualitative study which involved 15 ODL students taking the JUE 100 Preparatory English course at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the data was conducted inductively, taking into account the participants' expressions and the researchers' interpretations. The findings revealed that the use of the CAKE mobile app has positively impacted students' learning experiences by improving their motivation, fluency and confidence. Besides that, the students had a generally positive perception of the CAKE mobile app. The app's updated content, use of real cartoon and movie clips and self-paced learning features were highly appreciated by the students. Challenges such as internet connectivity issues and limited opportunities for interaction were also reported. This first study ever conducted in Malaysia study provides valuable insights into the potential use of the CAKE mobile app as a tool for enhancing ESL students' speaking skills in higher institutions in Malaysia specifically for ODL students.

Keywords: CAKE application, ODL programme, ESL students, speaking skills

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has led to the widespread use of English language as a means of communication and as a gateway to the globalized world. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Malaysia recognizes the importance of mastering English as a global language and considers it a relevant skill to meet the demands of the industry and global marketing (Economic Planning Unit, 2021; Zaman, 2019). Furthermore, the National Education Philosophy emphasises the promotion of the English language in higher education sectors, as reflected in the admission requirements of Malaysian higher education institutions (Too, 2017).

In order to create a conducive environment for English language learning in higher education institutions, both formal and non-formal learning opportunities are essential. The MOE highlights the importance of such learning opportunities to ensure that students can apply their knowledge in the real world (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d). The use of technology is also considered a crucial component in the English language learning ecosystem, as it can enable learning anytime and anywhere to benefit both educators and students (Adnan et al., 2019). Many English language learning applications are available to support this approach, including the popular CAKE application which has been widely used by students for its interactive and engaging features (Anggaraini, 2022; Chotimah& Pratiwi, 2022; Fatin, 2021; Octavianita, 2022).

In terms of language skills, students need to master four essential skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - and these skills are interconnected, meaning that a lack of competence in one will affect the others (Christopher, 2016). Speaking skills seemed to be more important than the other three skills because speaking occurs frequently in both formal and informal settings (Kashinathan& Aziz, 2021). Additionally, speaking skills are essential for undergraduate students' success in their studies and careers (Kashinathan& Aziz, 2021; Sirisrimangkorn, 2021). The skill is also regarded as one of the functional work skills in the outcome-based education that students need to demonstrate throughout the learning trajectory (Malaysian Qualification Agency, 2019). Overall, these factors underscore the importance of English language learning in higher education institutions and the need for students to develop their speaking skills to succeed in their studies and future careers.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Students face many challenges including little exposure to English, first language interference, low motivation and teacher-centred approach in ESL classroom learning (Annamalai et al 2022). Also, students have a hard time with content development, sentence structure, and choosing right words to use in English (Naim et al 2020). As a result, some Malaysian students have lack of English communication skills (Kashinathan, & Aziz 2021). The ability to express oneself in a foreign language such as English is often deemed difficult for language learners (Leong, 2017). Some students in Malaysia are reported to struggle to speak in English (Kashinathan, & Aziz 2021). In particular, students had lack of confidence in aspects of speaking skills such as fluency, pronunciation (Al-Tamimi et al. 2020; Tom et al. 2013) and vocabulary (Tati et al. 2016; Badrasawi et al. 2020; Nor et al. 2019).

Apart from that, Malaysian students still struggle to master in English in a way that is sufficient to meet the needs of employers (Thulasi et a. 2021). As the average English proficiency of an employee is considered acceptable by employers (Ting et al. 2017), one need to work on the speaking skill to meet the required standard. Moreover, English communication skill is highly valued by private sector employers (Nesaratnam, 2020).

Rajendran and Yunus (2021) discover that mobile applications can help students develop their speaking abilities. A few of the benefits include the ability to create a stress-free environment, support situated learning, be easy to use, and incorporate the concept of constructivism. Annamalai et al., (2022) revealed that the use of mobile apps among undergraduate students in their study has assisted the students to improve their vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Despite some limitations faced by students who used the apps such as fee requirement, interference like advertisement and challenges in terms of obtaining a good internet connection, the apps have been deemed able to promote students' language learning through repetition of sentences, gamification features and the interactivity of the apps. Annamalai et al (2022) further suggested that educational practitioners in the

Malaysian higher institutions can guide students to utilise particular educational mobile apps for language learning. Mobile apps can create a stress-free environment, support situated learning, be easy to use, and incorporate the concept of constructivism.

The use of mobile apps, such as the Cake application, has been shown to improve students' vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Annamalai et al., 2022). Although some limitations, such as fees, advertisements, and internet connectivity issues, were reported, the repetition of sentences, gamification features, and interactivity of the app have been found to promote students' language learning. Therefore, educational practitioners in Malaysian higher institutions can guide students to utilize educational mobile apps for language learning (Annamalai et al., 2022).

However, no studies have been conducted in the Malaysian context that focus on the use of a specific mobile app, such as the Cake application, among ESL students. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of the CAKE mobile app on the students' speaking skills learning experiences and to investigate the students' perceptions about the use of the CAKE mobile app for learning speaking skills. The findings of this study will contribute to raising awareness among educational practitioners regarding the use of mobile apps as a tool for language learning among ESL students in Malaysia. Two objectives have been formulated in this study: 1) To examine the impact of the CAKE mobile app on the students' speaking skills learning experiences and 2) To investigate the students' perceptions about the use of the CAKE mobile app for learning speaking skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1978) believed that students' knowledge arises from interactions with their environments before internalization happens. Through communication with people or objects, students learn within their environment (Kim, 2001). Such an internalisation of the experience could lead to advanced thinking (Lawton, 2017) or cognitive development (Wiggs, 2012). Another key element of social constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD explains the concept of individual learning, with and without support from a more knowledgeable person. It has been argued that students' level of thinking is enhanced through social interactions. Students will make progress if they are facilitated to advance just beyond their current level of knowledge (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). Scaffolding is a concept closely associated with ZPD in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Yang & Wilson, 2006). Scaffolding is likened to a structure that is erected to hold up a partially constructed building. Once the building has enough strength, the supporting structure can be taken away. Vygotsky (1978) referred to scaffolding as the assistance offered by other people such as parents, teachers, friends and reference sources such as the CAKE mobile app. Such types of support may allow students to achieve more in the learning process (Yang & Wilson, 2006).

The CAKE mobile application

The Cake mobile app has become one of the most popular English apps in recent years. The primary content of this application is short and entertaining English conversations in forms of video and audios which are updated daily. The programme facilitates learners to learn about collocations, vocabularies, idioms, phrases and grammatical items such as tenses, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions. Speaking practice is also the main feature

of the Cake app, which focuses on pronunciation skills, vocabulary, and grammar so that students can learn to speak fluently. Students can also practice their speaking skills through dialogue repetition and pronunciation practice. Students can get immediate feedback and check their progress against other users. There is an Android and iOS version of the Cake application available for free download. To begin, firstly, students need to sign in before using the application. This step can be performed through students' Facebook account or Google account. Students can also sign is as a guest with restricted access. Once signed in, students will obtain 30 coins that will be spent for the lessons. After that, begin, students need to select appropriate level of English lessons they want to study. The levels are beginner, elementary, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. Next, students can click the microphone button to start with the speaking lessons.

Previous studies on the CAKE application

Research on the use of the Cake application is currently limited, with all studies conducted so far taking place in Indonesian educational institutions. To the knowledge of the researchers, no studies have been conducted on the application in Malaysia. One area in which the Cake application has been found to be effective is in improving students' pronunciation (Anggaraini, 2022) found that students' pronunciation improved significantly after using the application, which helped them to develop better communication skills. Similarly, Suryani et al., (2021) reported that students' pronunciations improved significantly as they used the Cake application. By improving their pronunciation, students can communicate more effectively in English, which can be beneficial for academic and professional purposes.

In addition to improving pronunciation, The Cake application has also been found to have a positive impact on students' speaking skills (Kusmaryani, et al., 2019; Paramita et al., 2022; Rahmani et al., 2021). Conversely, college students' speaking skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) improved significantly with the use of the Cake application (Chotimah & Pratiwi, 2022). Similar findings were also reported by Nuraeni and Yanthi (2020) who reported that the Cake application has improved students' speaking skills besides, boosted motivation, and enhanced self-esteem in high school students. the Cake application has also been found to enhance vocabulary mastery. Besides that, the Cake application helped seventh-grade students to expand their vocabulary and develop better word recognition skills (Fatin, 2021) using various mobile applications, including Cake, resulted in positive outcomes on students' speaking and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, using various mobile applications, including Cake, has also improved students' critical thinking skills (Kusmaryani, et al., 2019; Hasyim, 2022) and Putri et al., 2023 on the other hand reported that the Cake application enhanced students' listening skills. Some students found the app to be both interesting and user-friendly. Specifically, they were drawn to the videos, movies, and vlogs that included subtitles (Suryani et al., 2021). Additionally, Lestari (2021) and Nuraeni and Yanthi, (2020) noted that the app fostered a sense of enjoyable learning among students. In summary, the Cake application is a popular English language learning app that offers a wide range of features to help students improve their pronunciation, speaking, vocabulary, critical thinking and listening. The studies conducted on the application have shown positive impacts on students' learning outcomes, motivation, self-esteem and engagement. However, further studies are needed to investigate the effectiveness of the Cake application in different educational settings, particularly in Malaysia. All of these studies were carried out in Indonesian educational institutions and to the best of researchers' knowledge no study has been done in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative method because the objective is to understand people's experiences related to a particular situation (Merriam, 2014), in this context the use of the CAKE mobile app by ODL students. A qualitative study is also a valuable approach for examining a specific situation about which little is known (Kumar, 2011). The study will include 20 ODL students who register in JUE 100 Preparatory English subject. The participating students were required to take a two-hour credit course on JUE 100 as part of their bachelor's degree programme. Qualitative studies do not follow a set formula for choosing a sample size, as opposed to quantitative studies (Patton, 2002). However, it is considered sufficient to have a minimum sample size of 12 (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Other scholars believe that 20 to 30 participants will be appropriate for qualitative studies (Marshall et al 2013). The purposive sampling technique will be utilised because it will generate the most relevant and ample data (Yin, 2011). Participating students were briefed about the study. They were introduced to the Cake mobile app. Then, the researchers explained how to use the app, its features, and the contents. Semi- structured interviews were primarily used as the research instrument to garner information from the participants.

Wellington (2015) stated that through the interview, we can probe interviewees' "thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives" (p. 71). The interview questions were prepared and experts in the field of educational research were consulted. The interview questions were also piloted with several undergraduate students. The questions were finalised after incorporating suggestions and feedback from the experts and pilot study. After conducting the semi-structured interviews with the 15 ODL students who used the CAKE mobile app for speaking, the researchers transcribed the audio recordings and analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were first read and re-read to get familiarise with the data. Then, initial codes are identified and reviewed before grouping them into categories. These categories were then refined and further organized into broader themes that captured the overall experiences of the participants.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data gathered from participants' experiences with the CAKE Mobile App for enhancing speaking skills. Through a thematic exploration, this section explains distinct themes, sub-themes, and corresponding codes that encapsulate the richness of participants' narratives. The table below illustrates the analysis and findings for this study.

Table 1: Themes, sub-themes and codes

Research question 1: Impact of the CAKE Mobile App on Speaking Skills Learning Experiences		
Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Improved motivation	User-friendly interface	Interface usability; Navigational ease
	Variety of learning activities	Diverse learning options Engaging activities
	Personalised feedback	Individualised feedback; Tailored guidance
	Gamification features	Point and reward systems; Game-like approach

Improved speaking fluency	Conversation and dialogue-based activities	Practical dialogues; Natural language practice
	Speech recognition technology	Pronunciation correction; Real-time feedback.
Enhanced confidence	Practical communication skills	Real-life applications; Everyday communication scenarios
	Feedback and progress tracking	Continuous feedback; Monitoring progress

Research Question 2: Perceptions of the CAKE Mobile App for Learning Speaking Skills		
Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Positive perceptions	Updated content	Appreciation for frequent updates; Fresh content; Staying engaged and motivated; Continuous learning experience;
	Real cartoon and movie clips	Usefulness for listening and comprehension skills; Learning idiomatic expressions and cultural references; Engagement and relevance to language learning goals; Tailoring learning experience to individual needs;
	Self-paced learning feature	Flexibility to review or progress at own pace; Motivation and engagement.
Challenges	Internet connectivity issue	Frustration with slow internet connection; Hindrance to completing exercises or watching videos
	Limited opportunities for interaction	Lack of interaction with instructors or students; Perceived limitation in language learning; Desire for more opportunities for feedback and interaction

Research question 1: Impact of the CAKE Mobile App on Speaking Skills Learning Experiences

The findings of this study suggest that the CAKE Mobile App has a positive impact on speaking skills learning experiences. Participants reported several benefits associated with the app, including increased motivation, improved speaking fluency, and enhanced confidence in using the target language. Participants reported feeling more motivated to learn the language when

using the CAKE Mobile App. The user-friendly interface and intuitive design of the app emerged as influential factors in creating an engaging learning environment. One participant vividly stated,

> *"The app's engaging interface and interactive design truly kept me motivated to delve deeper into language learning. It felt less like a task and more like an enjoyable experience."*

The variety of learning activities offered by the app, ranging from interactive lessons to immersive exercises, contributed significantly to sustaining learners' interest. A participant elaborated,

> *"I never felt bored using the app because there was always something new to discover or learn. The diverse range of activities kept me motivated and curious."*

The incorporation of gamification features, such as earning points and stars for completing tasks, was particularly well-received. Participants appreciated the game-like approach, describing it as a refreshing and enjoyable aspect of the learning process. One participant articulated,

> *"The points system added a fun element to my learning journey. It felt like a challenge to earn more points, and it motivated me to push myself further. Learning became a game, and I loved it."*

Besides that, The CAKE Mobile App played a pivotal role in enhancing participants' speaking fluency. The focus on conversation and dialogue-based learning activities facilitated a more natural and immersive language practice. Participants highlighted the practicality of engaging in dialogues that mimicked real-life scenarios, making the language learning experience more authentic. A participant shared,

> *"The app's emphasis on conversation made me feel like I was having real interactions. It helped me practice using the language in everyday situations, and that significantly improved my speaking fluency."*

The integration of speech recognition technology within the app emerged as a valuable tool for learners. This feature not only allowed participants to identify errors in pronunciation but also provided real-time feedback. A participant reflected on this, stating,

> *"The speech recognition technology was a game-changer for me. It helped me notice nuances in pronunciation that I might have overlooked. Getting instant feedback made the learning process more dynamic and effective."*

Furthermore, The CAKE Mobile App instilled a profound sense of confidence in participants, particularly in their ability to apply the language in real-life situations. The emphasis on practical communication skills, such as ordering food or asking for directions, resonated strongly with learners. A participant expressed,

> *"The app didn't just focus on language theory; it prepared me for real-world scenarios. I felt more confident interacting with native speakers, knowing I had practiced these situations in the app."*

The feedback and progress tracking features within the app were instrumental in shaping participants' confidence. Continuous feedback provided a supportive mechanism for improvement, and progress tracking allowed learners to see their advancements over time. A participant shared,

> *"Receiving feedback after each activity made me feel supported in my learning journey. It wasn't just about the final result; the app helped me understand my strengths and areas for improvement. It was like having a personal language coach guiding me."*

Research question 2: Perceptions of the CAKE Mobile App for Learning Speaking Skills

The findings of this study illuminate positive perceptions among participants regarding the CAKE Mobile App for learning speaking skills. Participants consistently commended the app, emphasising key aspects such as the updated content, use of real cartoon and movie clips, and the self-paced learning feature. Participants expressed genuine appreciation for the CAKE Mobile App's commitment to frequent updates and fresh content. The dynamic nature of the app played a crucial role in maintaining engagement throughout their language learning journey. One participant enthusiastically remarked,

> *"I never felt the monotony of learning because the app consistently offered new content. It was like unwrapping a present each time I logged in, keeping me excited and motivated to continue my learning."*

The utilisation of real cartoon and movie clips within the app was highly valued by participants. They found these resources to be not only engaging but also instrumental in improving listening and comprehension skills. A participant shared,

> *"The inclusion of authentic videos from movies and TV shows was a brilliant move. It provided insights into real-life language use, improved my listening skills, and made the learning experience both enjoyable and practical."*

Participants found these resources not only educational but also relevant to their language learning goals, creating a sense of connection with real-world language applications. The self-paced learning aspect of the CAKE Mobile App received acclaim from participants. This feature empowered learners to tailor their experiences based on individual needs and preferences. One participant highlighted the significance of this flexibility, stating,

> *"The ability to learn at my own pace was a game-changer. Whether I needed to revisit material or move forward, the app allowed me to navigate my learning journey comfortably. It contributed significantly to my sense of control and engagement."*

The self-paced learning feature emerged as a key facilitator in sustaining motivation and interest among participants, aligning with their unique learning styles. Despite the overwhelmingly positive perceptions, participants identified a few challenges, notably internet connectivity issues and limited opportunities for interaction. Slow internet connections posed hindrances, leading to frustrations among users. A participant shared,

> *"The learning experience was affected when faced with slow internet. It hindered seamless navigation through exercises and impacted my progress negatively."*

Additionally, participants expressed a desire for increased interaction within the app. They felt that more opportunities to engage with instructors or fellow learners would enrich their language learning experience. One participant expressed,

"While the app was effective for individual practice, I wished for more chances to interact with others. It would have provided valuable feedback and enhanced the real-world application of the language."

DISCUSSION

The findings that the CAKE Mobile App increased learners' motivation to learn the language is consistent with previous research (Anggaraini,2022; Nuraeni & Yanthi, 2020). Students in this study also enjoyed learning through videos and movies which is similar to the past studies Hasyim, 2022; Suryani et al., 2021). The current study's findings also revealed that students speaking skills and pronunciations have improved in line with previous research including Anggaraini (2022); Paramita et al., (2022); Chotimah and Pratiwi, (2022); Kusmaryani, et al., (2019); Nuraeni and Yanthi, (2020) and Rahmani et al., (2021). Additionally, students' listening skills have also increased which is similar to the past studies (Hasyim, 2022; Putri et al., 2023). Besides, the fun learning feature of the app engaged students in this study, similar to Lestari (2021) and Nuraeni and Yanthi, (2020). Difficulties reported by the students while engaging in the Cake application was not found in the previous studies related to the Cake application. However, limited internet connectivity was a problem mentioned by participating students who use the educational mobile app in general (Annamalai et al., 2022).

The use of the CAKE mobile application among ESL undergraduate students in the ODL programme can be viewed through the lens of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. The app can be seen as a reference source and a form of scaffolding, as it provides students with support for their speaking skills development. The app allows students to interact with the language and receive feedback, similar to the interactions that take place in the Zone of Proximal Development. The support provided by the app could lead to improved cognitive development and advanced thinking, as students learn within their environment through communication with the app. Therefore, the use of the CAKE mobile app aligns with Vygotsky's theory, as it provides support for ESL students in their learning process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the positive impact and perceptions surrounding the CAKE Mobile App for learning speaking skills. The findings underscore the app's effectiveness in enhancing motivation, improving speaking fluency, and instilling confidence among users. The app's dynamic features, including gamification elements, speech recognition technology, and practical communication skill emphasis, contribute significantly to its appeal among language learners. The positive perceptions regarding the updated content, real cartoon and movie clips, and the self-paced learning feature indicate that the CAKE Mobile App aligns well with learners' preferences and needs. However, challenges related to internet connectivity and limited interaction opportunities highlight areas for potential improvement. The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational practices, emphasizing the potential of mobile applications like the CAKE Mobile App in supporting language learning. Educators can consider incorporating such technology into their teaching methods to enhance speaking skills, motivation, and overall language proficiency among students. The

study suggests several avenues for future research, such as quantitatively assessing the impact of mobile language learning apps. Additionally, further investigation through cross-cultural studies would provide valuable insights into the varied effectiveness of these tools across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Moreover, examining the applicability and efficacy of such apps in various educational settings would contribute to a nuanced understanding of their potential benefits. Given the scarcity of studies specifically focusing on the use of language learning apps in the Malaysian classroom, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research in this area. Researchers are encouraged to build upon these identified research gaps to advance the evolving landscape of technology-enhanced language education and address the limited existing literature on the subject.

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