STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON IMPLEMENTING APP "HALLO" IN ENHANCING ENGLISH SPEAKILLS

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Abstract: "Hallo" is a mobile application allowing the users to make random conversations with real foreigners all around the world. Currently, there is little research conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of employing the app "Hallo" into teaching and learning languages. The purpose of the study was to investigate the students' perceptions towards the implementation of app "Hallo" into enhancing English speaking skills. Data were collected from twenty-five sophomores from Faculty of Foreign Languages at a Vietnamese University through a questionnaire and an interview. The findings showed that English majors considered the app "Hallo" as a motivational tool to enhance their English speaking skills and had significantly positive attitudes towards making daily conversations with other users on this app. The study suggests that the app "Hallo" should be recommended for other levels of students.

Keywords: Application, real conversations, students' perceptions, English speaking.

1. Introduction

With the advance of technology, educators apply a number of technological products into facilitating and improving education as well as teaching methods (Ahmed, 2016; Nami, 2020). Progression in

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developing mobile apps tends to push more educational environments into interactive communities (Barati & Zolhavarieh, 2012). The learning environment is not limited in the classroom, but expanding outside it. A smart phone with stable internet access allows the learners to be able to learn any languages anytime and anywhere they like.

A number of apps are created to assist learning in practicing English skills. App "Hallo" is considered as the first real-time, language-learning, social platform in the app store, produced by Joon Beh and his co-founder, Benjamin Dent in 2017. With the function of matching random users to talk on the app, the users can have chances of practicing English speaking with A number of other users all over the world. It is really convenient for language learners who just stay at home, and communicate with foreigners on a mobile app.

Currently, there have been a great number of studies related to Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Belanger, 2005; Chinnery, 2006; Garcia Cabrere, 2002; Kukulska-Hulme, 2005; Valarmathi, 2011), but very few researchers having interest in studying the effectiveness of utilizing the app "Hallo" in enhancing English speaking. Having envisioned the benefits of practicing English speaking on app "Hallo", this study was carried out with the goals of exploring learners' perceptions towards implementing this app to enhance English speaking skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Speaking skills

Qasemi (2020) defined speaking as a means of communication that illustrates the most significant language competency. Speaking is stated as a process of communicating information, thoughts and feelingsbetween two people (Eckard & Kearny, 1981). To communicate successfully, two individuals need to exchange opinions and emotions

by voice. Bygate (1987) stated that to be able to speak a language, it is necessary to know a certain amount of vocabulary and grammatical points.

According to Ur (1996), there are four characteristics of a successful speaking activity, which include: 1) Learners talk as much as possible during the period of time assigning speaking activities; 2) Participation is even, which allows classroom discussion not to be dominated by a minority of talkative participants, and all students get a chance to speak; 3) Motivation is high, which learners are eager to speak; 4) Language is of an acceptable level, which allows learners to express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

2.2. MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning)

MALL, Mobile Assisted Language Learning, has been developed from m-learning (mobile learning) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). However, MALL is different from CALL for its personal use and portability across various contexts; and it is similar with m-learning because both of them focus on contextualized flexibility and active community participation of the language learners. MALL exploits mobile technologies for language learning such as pocket electronic dictionaries, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, MP3 players, and tablet PCs (Zhao, 2005).

According to Kukulska-Hulme (p. 120, 2010), MALL may be considered as "a process on the continuum of teacher-driven versus learner-driven learning". The dimensions of language learning, particularly learner participation in the language learning activities and the use of language, are integrated into m-learning on this continuum (see Figure 1)
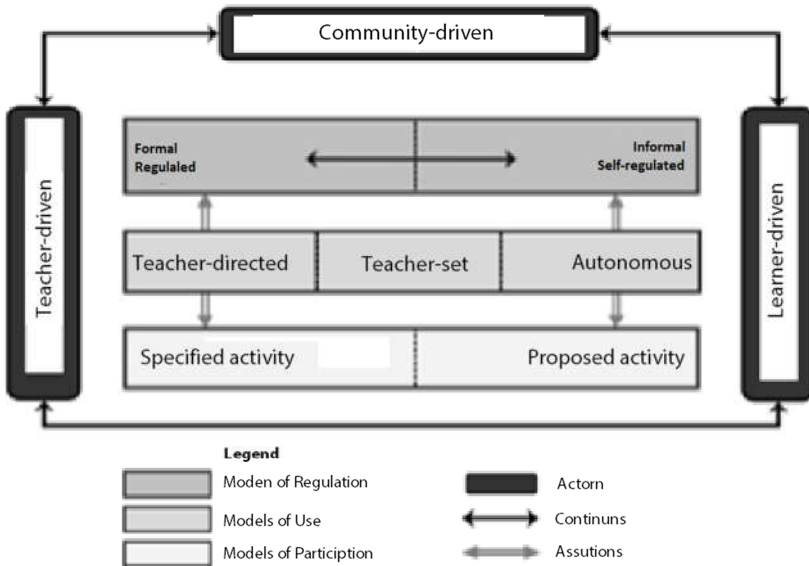
Figure 1: Continuum and Association between Modes of Regulation and Models of Use & Participation in a MALL Environment

Learners and teachers are the main actors in the design of MALL activities. The continuum is divided into three dimensions: (1) In the first dimension of the continuum, two forms of language learning applied are formal and informal. In formal language learning, there is a requirement of the regulation of the process of learning, while informal learning is not necessary to build the regulation by other actors, but by the learner himself only; (2) In the second dimension, three models of use are presented. The first model of use is teacher-directed activity, where teachers control pace, time and setting, learning objectives and outcomes. Learners are not independent but directed by teachers to participate in activities of MALL. The third model of use is autonomous learning activity, where the learners are all free to use a mobile device to learn languages; (3) In the third dimension, specified activity model and proposed activity model are two main sorts, in which the learner is provided with multimedia materials or interactive exercises for use on their own mobile device or devices provided by the institution; and participation is supportive for learning and the learners can choose to

take part in extracurricular language learning and they may collaborate with others while doing so.

2.3. Previous studies

There were a great number of studies investigating the effectiveness of using mobile applications in facilitating both learning and teaching foreign languages. However, applying the app "Hallo" into learning and teaching foreign languages is not currently conducted by the researchers and educators in Vietnam as well as in the world.

Alameen (2007) explored using "Audacity" in the language classroom, which included activities enhancing speaking skills, pronunciation, and recording interviews. This application facilitated both teaching and learning a foreign language for the teacher and the students. By using "Audacity" on a smartphone, the teacher finds it easy to record students' speaking performances in the class for further evaluations. In addition, this restoration of speaking practice can benefit the low-level students, who want to have speaking samples for more practicing English speaking at home.

Investigating the effectiveness of implementing "Voice blog" in learning a foreign language in general and in improving English speaking in specific, some researchers employed "voice blog" to manage students' speaking homework and enhance the interactions among learners (Hsu et al., 2008), or to foster speaking activities in the classroom (Sun, 2009), or to create opportunities to practice English speaking outside the classroom (Huang, 2015). The results from those studies showed that "voice blog" is a great electronic portfolio which helps restore students' speaking performances and follow the students' progression easily, as well as improve their speaking ability.

In one study on fostering speaking skills for the students outside the classroom, Ahn and Lee (2016) indicated that integrating the

technology of speech recognition into application to practice speaking like Speaking 60 Junior created an ideal speaking environment outside the class. This implementation also increased the enjoyment in learning for the students due to the fact that the users could receive the feedback of their speaking in terms of word or sentence repetitions and role-play immediately.

In general, previous researchers have had different perspectives on the implementation of mobile apps to foster students' English speaking skills. Some aimed at creating opportunities for students to practice speaking outside the classroom (Ahn & Lee, 2016; Alameen, 2007; Huang, 2015), while others integrated mobile apps into classroom activities (Sun, 2009) or applied both in the class and at home (Hsu et al., 2008). However, these implementations were just the interactions of the users with the available programs programmed on the apps, which may cause the boredom and repetition (Ahn & Lee, 2016). One striking feature of the app "Hallo" is that this app allows the users to interact directly with other real users all over the world, which may create a motivational English speaking environment for English language learners.

2.4. Research question

The study was aimed to answer the following questions:

- *Is the app "Hallo" considered as a motivational tool in practicing speaking English for students?*

- *What are the students' attitudes towards using the app "Hallo"daily to foster English speaking skills?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Pedagogical Settings & Participants

The study was carried out at Hong Duc University located in Thanh Hoa city, Vietnam. The study took place during 10 weeks of the second semester in the academic year 2021-2022.

Twenty-five participants were chosen from an intact class at Faculty of Foreign Languages. These students were sophomores (8 males and 17 females). Their ages were from nineteen to twenty. During this second semester, these participants learned the subject named "Speaking and Listening 4" and the textbook was the book "Achievers B2-Student's Book" written by Jane Revell and Ken Wilson (2015). The students needed to have the English proficiency level of B1 in order to meet the requirement of this subject, which was assessed at the end of the first academic year.

All the participants were asked to use the app "Hallo" and make daily conversations on the app with other random users all over the world in order to foster their speaking skills. The teacher assigned this activity as their daily homework with a topic per week, which was related to the topics of the units in the textbook. To check the frequency of using the app, the teacher required the students to send their recorded video of conversation on "Hallo" via Zalo group every day.

3.2. Design of the Study

The mixed-method design including both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were employed in the study. The mix-method research was chosen because the benefit of this technique is that researchers are better able to collect and evaluate much more and a wider variety of data than they would be able only to use one technique (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Therefore, including qualitative and quantitative data in the study may systematically provide the results with feasibility and accuracy.

The purpose of the study was to find out the students' perceptions towards implementing app "Hallo" in enhancing their English speaking ability. A questionnaire and interviews were two main instruments. These instruments were carried out after ten weeks when the participants finished using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted for ten weeks. Before starting implementing the app "Hallo" as daily speaking homework, the teacher instructed all the participants how to use the app. During ten weeks, the participants were asked to use the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day. The topics for daily conversations with real random users on app "Hallo" varied each week. To check the frequency of using the app for practicing English speaking, the teacher asked all the participants to send video-records of their conversations on the app "Hallo" into Zalo group. These videos were sent every day and were managed as well as assessed in terms of quality by the teacher. After ten weeks using the app for practicing English speaking, all the participants were required to complete a questionnaire, which aimed at finding the students' perceptions towards using the app, and thirteen of them were selected randomly for face-to-face interviews to corroborate the questionnaire's findings and learn how the participants felt about using app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day. The analysis was based on statistical and descriptive methods.

4. Data collection & Analysis

To collect data for the findings, two instruments were employed: questionnaire and interviews. Both were carried out after the students experienced using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day. The result was presented in analysing statistically and descriptively.

4.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire has numerous advantages, including a high response rate, reliable sampling, and minimal bias (Oppenheim, 2005). This instrument is also regarded as a highly efficient method of collecting data from a large number of respondents (Takac, 2008). In

this study, a questionnaire was given to twenty-five participants participating in the study to evaluate students' attitudes towards daily practicing English speaking on app "Hallo" at home. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items. Mean scores for a selection of 5-point Likert-type items listed "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree",and "strongly agree" were to reflect students' perceptions. The maximumand the minimum boards of each scale taken from Al-Omar (2004) were:

1) Means from (1.00-1.80) stand for "strongly disagree".

2) Means from (1.80-2.60) stand for "disagree".

3) Means from (2.60-3.40) stand for "neutral".

4) Means from (3.40-4.20) stand for "agree".

5) Means from (4.20-5.00) stand for "strongly agree".

The reliability test for the questionnaire items produced a Cronbach Alpha of 0.902, which could be considered highly reliable.

The chosen participants had about ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. Before completing, they were told that the goal of the questionnaire was to investigate their perceptions of using the app "Hallo" as an educational tool to enhance English speaking skills every day. There were no right and wrong responses, so they were expected to answer truthfully as much as possible.

4.2. Interviews

Another instrument utilized to gather data was an interview, which could help gain a better understanding of the subject matter from the participants' points (Kvale, 1996). An interview is viewed as a social engagement, and knowledge is generated in the dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, the interviews were designed with three main questions in order to corroborate the questionnaire's findings and learn how the

participants felt about using app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day:

1) What do you think about using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking with random users every day?

2) What advantages did you get in using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day?

3) Did you have any problems while using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day? (If yes, what were those?)

Thirteen of twenty-five students participating in the study were chosen randomly to do the face-to-face interviews. Each interview lasted about ten minutes. Vietnamese was allowed to help them express their thoughts freely. All interviews were audio-recorded to support the descriptive analysis. Their names were coded into S1, S2, and up to S13.

5. Results

5.1. App "Hallo" as a motivational tool

The first part of the questionnaire was aimed at finding out the learners' motivation in using the app "Hallo" to foster English speaking. The result in table 1 reveals that the participants were generally motivated in using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day (M=3.77).

It is easily seen from Figure 2, in terms of educational value, the respondents stated that practicing English speaking on Hallo brought educational value to them (M=3.57), and they gained benefits from enhancing their English speaking from daily conversations on Hallo (M=3.44). Also, the participants agreed that they would like to recommend this app to others for fostering English speaking skills (M=3.48). On the other hand, the participants expressed that this practice on Hallo did not actually alleviate their concerns about the matters of the subject, such as listening skills and self-assessments

(M=2.84). Especially, they disagreed that assigning speaking homework by practicing English speaking on Hallo was a part of their learning (M=2.00) and the topics assigned for doing homework did not help them much (M=2.00).

Motivation		
A. Educational value of app Hallo	Mean	Std Dev
1 I find practicing English speaking on Hallo to be educational.	3.68	1.345
2 I find daily conversations on Hallo help enhance my speaking ability.	3.44	1.226
3 Practicing English speaking on Hallo helps alleviate my concerns about subject-related matter.	2.84	1.313
4 I would recommend using this app to other students to practice English speaking.	3.48	1.085
5 Practicing English speaking is not appropriate to assign homework.	2.00	1.118
6 The topics assigned to make conversations on Hallo are helpful.	2.00	1.000
B. Expectancy		
7 I find the topics assigned for practicing English speaking are not appropriate to my needs.	3.76	1.332
8 I find easy to make one-on-one conversations on Hallo.	3.96	1.060
9 I find easy to connect with random users on Hallo.	4.04	.935
10 I find that practicing English speaking on Hallo is waste of time.	2.23	1.069
C. Affect		
11 I find making daily conversations on Hallo to be entertaining.	3.64	1.186
12 Practicing English speaking on Hallo is trendy and socially acceptable.	3.96	1.172
13 I enjoy the interface of app Hallo.	3.88	1.301
14 Practicing English speaking on Hallo makes me feel less anxious when speaking.	3.36	1.186
15 I like practicing English speaking with real people on Hallo.	3.56	1.158
Total	3.77	1.196

Figure 2: Questionnaire Results: Motivation in Using App "Hallo" (N=25)

In terms of the expectancy, the students participating in the survey believed that practicing English speaking by making one-on-one conversations on Hallo was easy (M=3.96) and they found it easy to connect with random users to practice speaking English on Hallo (M=4.04). The topics they had to speak on Hallo were not of their interest (M=3.76). The students disagreed that practicing on Hallo was a waste of time (M=2.23).

When evaluating the effectiveness of using app Hallo in motivating them, the students found that making daily conversations on Hallo was entertaining, trendy, enjoyable with its interface and enjoyable with speaking with real people (M=3.64, M=3.96, M=3.88, and M=3.56 respectively). Additionally, they also agreed that practicing English speaking on app Hallo made them feel less anxious when speaking (M=3.36).

The above results from the questionnaire were also similar with the data analysed from interviews. Most interviewees (10/N=13)

indicated that the app "Hallo" is very easy, interesting, and helpful to use to foster English speaking skills. The words such as "easy","interesting", "fun", "enjoy", "like", and "useful" were repeated frequently in the interviews.

> *"App "Hallo" is easy to use. When I open it, it is easy for me to connect with other users on it to practice English speaking. I just need to have a smart phone with internet access and then I can practice speaking anytime and anywhere I like." [S4]*

> *"I think this app is a great educational tool for learners who desire to find an environment to practice English speaking. It is really easy to download and talking with random people on this app brings me a lot of fun." [S7]*

> *"Personally, the interface of this app is simple and easy to use. I find it easy to create my account and speak randomly with others on it." [S10]*

> *"I feel thankful because my teacher introduced this app to me, which helps me a lot in enhancing my speaking skills. It is easy to use. I also feel excited whenever randomly matching to speak with another user on this app." [S13]*

The students also answered without any hesitation that they considered the app "Hallo" as an educational tool as well as a trendy and socially acceptable app, which assisted them to enhance their English speaking ability; and they highly recommended it to other users. Some typical words in their answers were recorded like "educational", "good tool to support education", "trendy", and "trend".

> *"In my opinion, the app "Hallo" can be considered as an educational tool. It is because it helps me a lot in learning. I could practice English speaking with other foreigners easily at home." [S2]*

> *"App "Hallo" is a useful and educational tool, which other learners should use frequently to practice English speaking." [S5]*

"I am glad when talking with other foreigners on Hallo. It is a good tool to support language learners. During the era of COVID-19, it is a trendy app, because I just need to have a smartphone and communicate with people all over the world at home." [S11]

5.2. Students' attitudes towards using app "Hallo"

The second part of the questionnaire was used in order to investigate students' attitudes towards using the app "Hallo" to practice English speaking every day. As shown in Figure 3, the participants seemed to have a significantly positive attitude towards daily practicing English speaking on app "Hallo" (M=3.77).

Attitudes	Mean	Std Dev
16 I find the number of topics for daily conversations on Hallo to be appropriate.	4.00	1.118
17 I find the length of each conversation to be appropriate.	4.40	.816
18 I find English speaking practicing on Hallo to be useful.	3.88	1.013
19 I find the atmosphere of each conversation on Hallo to be good.	4.00	1.000
20 I find the contents of the conversations on Hallo to be appropriate.	3.76	1.052
21 The topics assigned to practice on Hallo to be relevant to my learning.	3.20	1.225
22 I find the overall technical quality to be good.	3.60	1.414
23 I find making conversations with random users on Hallo to be helpful.	4.04	.935
24 I find the requirement of practicing English speaking on Hallo every day to be sufficient for my self-studying.	2.40	1.291
25 I find the random users to be appropriate to practice English speaking every day.	2.84	1.434
26 It would be better to have more detailed instructions of daily conversations on Hallo.	3.88	1.236
27 I find matching random users to practice English speaking on Hallo to be easy.	3.76	1.012
28 I find downloading app Hallo to be easy.	3.96	1.098
29 I find creating Hallo account to be easy.	2.68	1.345
30 I would like to use app "Hallo" immediately after I have downloaded it.	4.24	1.128
Total	3.77	1.20

Figure 3: Questionnaire Results: Attitude towards Using App "Hallo" (N=25)

Generally, there was a moderation of strong agreement among the participants in regards to most of the statements describing attitudes towards using app "Hallo" (statements 16-20, 22-23, 26-28 and 30), with moderate agreement assumed at a mean score of 3.40-4.20 and strong agreement at 4.20 and above. The highest mean (4.40) was for participant's agreement over the ideal length of conversations on Hallo, which is at least ten minutes. They remained neutral (i.e., they neither agreed nor disagreed) with statements 21 and 25 about the topics integrated in each conversation on the app "Hallo" and about

practicing English speaking with random users. However, the participants disagreed with statements 24 and 29 with means (M=2.40 and 2.68) respectively, which suggested practicing English speaking on Hallo is sufficient for their self-studying, and creating Hallo account is easy for them.

These results were linear with the interview results of the participants. Students highly agreed that the time length and the number of topics assigned per week for practicing English speaking on app "Hallo" were reasonable with their self-study. They also believed that their speaking ability was improved by practicing on Hallo every day.

> *"Every day, I need to complete 10 minutes talking with other users on the app "Hallo". This length time is not too short and not too long, and I am happy with it. Each week I have one topic to practice speaking, then I find it easy to complete the task that my teacher asks me to do." [S8]*

> *"I can improve my speaking by making daily conversations with a number of foreigners on the app "Hallo". This way made me foster my speaking skills." [S12]*

However, some students said that they had some problems in using the app and they were overloaded with practicing every day.

> *"I have to study several subjects this semester and I feel tired when I have to practice on Hallo every day. I have other homework, which is also very important and I need to complete." [S6]*

> *"I do not like using Instagram, but I need to have one if I want to set up the app "Hallo" on my phone." [S11]*

Findings from the questionnaire and the interviews indicate that the participants considered app "Hallo" as a motivational app in fostering their English speaking skills. By interacting with random users from all over the world, this app created an interesting and

inspirational speaking environment for English language learners. The participants held a really positive attitude towards practicing English speaking on this app. Nonetheless, the complicated setup of the app and the overload of other homework triggered the drawbacks of applying the app as a daily speaking assignment to students.

6. Discussion

The first research question investigated whether the app "Hallo" enhanced students' motivation in English speaking skills. Analysis indicated that the participants had positive agreements that they were motivated by making daily conversations on app "Hallo" (M=3.77). They held a strong belief that they were able to develop their speaking skills when using the app "Hallo" regularly. It is because the app is easy to download and friendly-user. In addition, the app "Hallo" seems to be valuable and useful to assist their learning, and it is a great educational tool for learners to practice English speaking every day. They said that this app should be highly recommended to other language learners. These results are in agreement with other studies, which found that mobile apps bring learners motivational benefits and create an enjoyable environment to practice English skills (Huynh et al., 2018; Ryder & Machajewski, 2017). Obviously, with the function of allowing the users to make direct calls randomly with other users all over the world, the app "Hallo" becomes an ideal mobile app for students to develop their English speaking skills. They practice with different users every day, which creates curiosity and motivation when using the app.

The second research question aimed at exploring the students' attitudes towards the implementation of app "Hallo" in fostering English speaking skills. They felt that the length time and the number of topics assigned for practicing on app "Hallo" were reasonable, which made it easy in completing the tasks required by the teacher. Additionally, talking randomly with random users on the app "Hallo"

also was one factor which engaged the students in using this app. They felt confident and less anxious when talking without seeing each other directly.

The students were neutral over the assigned topics for daily conversations on the app "Hallo", which were not familiar with their favourite speaking topics. As aforementioned explanation, the teacher chose the topics for practicing English speaking on Hallo based on the syllabus of the subject "Speaking and Listening 4" which they were studying in the second semester during that time, so the topics needed to be relevant to the contents of units in the textbook "Achievers B2-Student's Book" written by Jane Revell and Ken Wilson (2015). In fact, the topics in some units were hard and abstract for the students to make conversations on Hallo, such as failure and success, or deforestation. Therefore, it is essential to create a suitable context for the learners to encourage their speaking practice. This implication was correspondent with the findings in the study of Botero et al. (2018). The teacher gives students clear instructions before asking them to practice speaking English on the app by creating suggested questions and answers, which may facilitate the students' engagement with the app.

7. Conclusion & Implications

The findings of the study revealed the positive results in utilizing the app "Hallo" in enhancing students' speaking skills. App "Hallo" could be considered as an educational tool to support a speaking environment outside the classroom for the students due to its flexibility, easy-to-use functions, and effectiveness. The students found it exciting and enjoyable to make daily one-on-one conversations with random users on the app "Hallo". They practiced English speaking with a lot of fun and without any anxiety of speaking English with strangers, which is an important factor to get success in mastering speaking a foreign language. The length of time for daily practice on Hallo was acceptable with some, while a few felt exhausted when they had to do speaking homework day by day. The findings also showed that the

students found it difficult to strictly follow the topics assigned by the teacher when having conversations on app "Hallo". In short, the implementation of the app "Hallo" fostered students in practicing English speaking every day. The students considered this app as a motivational tool to positively motivate them to make random English conversations with foreigners all over the world.

Although the students' perceptions were positive towards using the app "Hallo" in fostering English speaking skills, there are still a number of areas for further research. Firstly, this study aimed at finding out the students' perceptions, but there were no findings declared on what aspects of speaking skills the students could improve. Secondly, the study just focused on speaking skills, but did not investigate other skills such as listening skills. Finally, this study was a small-scale one with the participation of twenty-five sophomores who had B1 English level. Therefore, the findings just covered the small population.

Some suggestions for further research are put forward based on the limitations of the current study. First, it is recommended that future research should be undertaken with a larger sample size to render the findings of the study more reliable and valid. Moreover, future studies should investigate the effectiveness of applying the app to enhance other skills as well as aspects of those skills.

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