

English-Majored Students' Perceptions of Using 4English for Reading Comprehension Development: A Case Study at Van Lang University

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Reading comprehension, 4English, mobile application, Perceptions

Although 4English, a mobile application, has gained attention for helping learners develop four language skills, few studies of 4English have been done. The main objective of this study is to explore English-majored students' perceptions of using 4English application to develop reading comprehension skills. The study involved 53 English-majored students at Van Lang University (VLU) adopting 4English to improve English reading comprehension. Data was collected through a survey completed by all participants and semi-structured interviews with five volunteers from the questionnaire respondents for in-depth insights. The findings revealed the participants' positive attitudes towards the application such as broadening their vocabulary, improving their ability to recognize more words in a sentence and supporting their perceived improvements in reading skills. Additionally, some challenges were identified including advanced vocabulary challenges, interface limitations and financial barriers. Consequently, 4English is recommended as an effective auxiliary tool for reinforcing reading skills beyond the classroom.

Introduction

Background to the study

With the advent of handheld mobile technologies, the integration of digital tools into everyday life has become increasingly common. As smartphones become more popular, the number of people owning these devices has significantly increased. The rapid development of mobile technologies, such as smartphones and tablets, has transformed the way people learn a second language (L2) (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2017). In many situations, mobile devices extend traditional phrase-learning, allowing learners to make autonomous decisions about where, when, and how to study an L2 (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Vietnamese students are no exception to this trend. Since classroom instruction alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for language practice, many students seek alternative

approaches to learning independently. In this context, the application of technology to English language learning has been considered both beneficial and effective (Le, 2022). Consequently, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has gained increasing attention and is highly recommended for integration into English teaching and learning practices at Vietnamese universities (Tran & Vuong, 2024).

Statement of the problem

As undergraduates at the university, the researchers realize that English-majored students at VLU are required to comprehend a large amount of English material. However, many students still have difficulty reading and understanding documents in English, especially difficult, specialized, and complex texts. Therefore, a lack of ability to understand written English will pose a challenge to their university education. Since the cultivation of reading comprehension skills is a long-term process, students must seek additional practice outside, often turning to technology for support. One of their efforts is practicing through the application on their mobile phones. A notable tool in this endeavor is the mobile application 4English, which is considered to assist students in improving their reading proficiency.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of English-majored students at VLU regarding the use of 4English in developing English reading comprehension and the challenges experienced while using the application to practice reading skills. The research results can be beneficial to the university students first, and they are expected to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the 4English application as an additional tool for practicing English reading skills. Moreover, they are anticipated to serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the educational utility of 4English.

Literature Review

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of linking text information to the reader's own prior knowledge and experiences to create meaning (McNamara, 2007). In other words, a text is not solely a source of information for readers. Instead, they actively connect new information with what they know to understand the writer's intention. Perfetti and Adlof (2012) argue that comprehension is a process in which readers construct varying mental models of narrating information from various sources of knowledge. This means that successful comprehension involves creating a meaningful understanding of a text rather than merely recognising individual words and sentences. In addition, readers need to make connections between ideas and infer information that is not explicitly stated in the text. To do so, they draw on relevant background knowledge to develop a coherent understanding of what they read (van den Broek & Espin, 2012).

In addition, reading comprehension is a complex process that involves not only word recognition but also vocabulary knowledge, grammatical understanding, memory and inferential thinking (Oakhill et al., 2014). This process begins with recognising words and understanding sentence structures so that readers can grasp the basic information presented in a text. Readers then retain important ideas in memory and connect them with information encountered later in the reading process. At the same time, they make inferences to identify relationships between ideas and understand information that is implied rather than directly stated.

Reading Comprehension in EFL contexts

Reading instruction in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms has traditionally been characterized by teacher-centered approaches in which learners are often expected to read aloud, translate texts, learn vocabulary explicitly and answer comprehension questions after reading (Wallace, 2001). Such approaches tend to emphasize product over process, limiting learners' opportunities for active engagement with texts. Consequently, language learning scholars have increasingly advocated learning in authentic and meaningful contexts beyond the classroom (Widdowson, 1978).

In addition, time constraints in classroom settings may limit opportunities for sustained reading practice in many EFL contexts (Men & Heng, 2026). As a result, learners often require additional opportunities to engage with reading materials outside formal instructional hours. In response to this need, technology-enhanced learning approaches have gained increasing attention as a means of extending learning beyond the classroom. Numerous studies have reported the growing use of mobile technology in education, collectively referring to these approaches as mobile learning (Hwang & Tsai, 2011). Mobile technologies offer learners convenient access to learning resources regardless of time and location, thereby supporting autonomous and continuous learning.

This approach is particularly relevant to reading development, as reading comprehension requires regular exposure to texts and frequent practice. Evidence from a Vietnamese EFL context supports the effectiveness of out-of-class reading activities. In a 10-week online extensive reading program, Bui and Macalister (2021) found that first-year university students increased their reading speed by approximately 20% and developed more positive attitudes towards reading. These findings suggest that providing learners with accessible reading opportunities beyond classroom boundaries can contribute to the development of reading comprehension. Therefore, technology-enhanced learning approaches, particularly those delivered through mobile devices, offer a promising solution for supporting reading practice in EFL contexts.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as a significant approach in language education due to the widespread use of mobile devices and the increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Although the concept of mobile learning has been defined in various ways, existing definitions generally fall into two main perspectives: learner mobility and device mobility (Burston, 2014).

Mobile learning technology has been widely recognized as particularly effective for learning activities conducted outside the classroom, as it allows learning to be more closely connected to real-world contexts and learners' everyday experiences. One of its key advantages is the ability to maximize learners' use of free time, enabling them to engage in language learning even while on the move (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005).

Empirically, Hossain (2018) investigated the use of mobile applications in English learning and found that the majority of students reported using smartphones and learning apps to support their study. The study further revealed that students who used English learning applications achieved higher performance in English proficiency tests compared to those who did not. Similarly, Darsih and Asikin (2020) examined EFL learners' perceptions of MALL and found that all participants used mobile applications for English learning and considered them both beneficial and convenient in enhancing their learning experience. In line with these findings, Metruk (2021) reported that Slovak EFL students frequently used smartphone applications to

support vocabulary acquisition and overall language skill development, and generally held positive attitudes toward mobile-based learning.

Overall, these studies indicate that mobile-assisted language learning is not only effective in improving language performance but also widely accepted by learners due to its flexibility, convenience, and ability to support continuous learning beyond the classroom.

Previous Studies

In relation to the current study, Vu et al. (2023) conducted an experimental study and found a positive impact of using 4English on secondary students' reading performance. Consequently, they recommended that teachers adopt the application to engage students in reading activities in class. This research serves as a basis for the current study to further explore the subject of English-majored university students.

In addition, Abdollahpour and Maleki (2012) demonstrated the efficacy of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in enhancing vocabulary development. This helps confirm the effectiveness of using mobile apps in learning English, although the study did not focus on reading comprehension. Furthermore, mobile-based learning programs may lead to superior vocabulary acquisition compared to traditional tools, such as physical flashcards (Basoglu and Akdemir, 2010). The researchers emphasized that mobile phones bring considerable pedagogical benefits by enabling learning outside the classroom.

With regard to reading comprehension, Khubyari and Narafshan (2016) reported that EFL learners preferred reading via mobile phones because of the convenience provided by their portability and accessibility. The findings suggested that mobile devices could create favorable conditions for reading practice by allowing learners to access learning materials anytime and anywhere. Collectively, these studies highlighted the educational potential of mobile-assisted learning and support the integration of mobile applications into English language learning.

However, despite the growing recognition of the benefits of mobile technology in language learning, relatively few studies have specifically focused on MALL in relation to reading comprehension. In particular, although Vu et al. (2023) reported positive outcomes regarding secondary students' attitudes toward the use of the 4English application in enhancing reading comprehension, their study was limited to secondary school learners and did not investigate English-majored university students. This indicates a gap in understanding how higher education learners perceive and experience the use of 4English for reading practice. Therefore, to bridge this gap, the present study aims to explore English-majored university students' perceptions of using the 4English application to practice and improve their reading skills.

Research Questions

The focus of this research is to explore the perceptions of VLU's English-majored students about using 4English as a tool to practice their ability to comprehend English. The research aims to answer the questions:

1. What are the English-majored students' perceptions towards the use of 4English to enhance reading comprehension?
2. What are the challenges experienced by English-majored students while using 4English to practice reading skills?

Methods

Mixed method

This study was conducted using mixed methods. Mixed methods research encompasses the collection, analysis, and integration of both qualitative and quantitative data within a single study (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). While quantitative research focuses on measuring phenomena and generalizing findings through numbers ("how long," "how many," etc.), qualitative research delves into the quality of experiences, exploring explanations, motivations, and individual perceptions of the world (Ghanad, 2023, p. 3794). According to Gilbert and Stoneman (2016), researchers employ mixed methods to refine their research tools for greater accuracy. By using mixed methods, this study aims to leverage the strengths of both approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of English-majored students' perceptions of using the 4English application to develop reading comprehension skills.

Population and sample of the study

The target population of this study consisted of English-majored students at VLU, who regularly engage with English academic materials, making reading comprehension an essential skill for their academic success. Participants were required to have prior experience using the free version of the 4English application voluntarily as a self-directed tool for reading practice outside the classroom. This is because the use was not required by the courses, but it was suggested for further practice. However, the duration of app usage was not considered an inclusion criterion, as the study focused on exploring students' perceptions of the application rather than examining its effectiveness over time.

For this study, the researchers aimed to conduct a small-scale, classroom-based study to explore students' perceptions within a specific educational context. The surveyed case was a group of English-majored students at VLU who were participating in a course of research methodology at the time of this study. Accordingly, 53 second-year students who used 4English for learning English responded to the questionnaire. Subsequently, five students from the surveyed group were chosen on a voluntary basis for follow-up interviews to explore the challenges students faced when using the application to practice their reading skills.

Tools of data collection

For this study, the data were gathered using a questionnaire and interviews.

Questionnaire:

To gather quantitative data, the researchers created a questionnaire based on the five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2), to Strongly Disagree (1), allowing participants to choose the rating that best reflected their perceptions. This questionnaire was adapted from the most related study (Vu et al., 2023), and it was reviewed by a research methods instructor at the university to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items for the research objectives before data collection. These helped to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. The survey includes 8 questions, which are separated into two sections. The first section is to discover the individuals' attitudes towards the accessibility of 4English based on their personal experiences. The second section aims to find out whether students find that 4English effectively assists their reading proficiency. It was distributed using Google Forms to students who are practicing English through 4English. Additionally, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese to ensure full understanding by participants.

Interviews:

To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with five English-majored students who were selected from the survey participants on a voluntary basis. The interviews were carried out face-to-face on the VLU campus, with an average duration of approximately 3-4 minutes per participant. This interview method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to use a list of predetermined questions while also asking spontaneous follow-up questions to clarify participants' responses when necessary. To explore the challenges students experienced while using 4English to practice reading skills, one main interview question was employed: *"What are the challenges you faced while using 4English to practice your reading skills?"* This question was also adapted from the most related previous study (Vu et al., 2023). Before addressing the main question, participants were asked for permission to record the interview and were asked to respond to several lead-in questions. Conducted in Vietnamese and audio-recorded with participants' consent, the interviews focused on students' actual experiences using the 4English application for reading practice, particularly the challenges, limitations, and negative experiences they encountered. The recordings were later transcribed and translated into English for data analysis.

Data collection procedures

The data collection process was conducted over one week (June 29–July 4, 2025) during the third term of the 2024–2025 academic year. To ensure that participants had relevant experience with the application, students who had used 4English for learning English were first identified. They were then informed of the research purposes, and their consent was obtained to ensure ethical compliance and voluntary participation. Once permission was granted, a questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions of using 4English to develop their reading comprehension skills. Over the first five days of the data collection period, 53 valid responses were obtained and used for analysis. Subsequently, during the final two days, participants were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews on a voluntary basis. Five students from the 53 respondents volunteered and were interviewed face-to-face to provide their insights into challenges experienced regarding the use of 4English for reading practice. The interviews were recorded for qualitative data analysis, and all participants remained anonymous throughout the study.

Data analysis

The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS Software to determine the means and standard deviations to gain a clearer view of participants' attitudes. The researchers also used the software to determine the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire:

Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
1	.681	3
2	.749	5

The internal consistency reliability of the two scales was 0.681 and 0.749, respectively, both exceeding 0.6. This proved the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire.

Item-Total Statistics

Item	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Q1	.504	.583
Q2	.498	.588
Q3	.491	.591
Q4	.540	.696
Q5	.622	.665
Q6	.506	.712
Q7	.464	.725
Q8	.461	.726

All items had Corrected item total correlation > 0.3 , meaning that all of the question items were kept.

The interviews were transcribed into written words for analysis. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all interview responses were reviewed and statements related to the students' challenges in using the application were identified. Then these statements were coded using keywords representing common issues reported. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently developed into themes.

Results/Findings**Research question 1: Students' Perceptions of Using 4English for Reading Comprehension Improvement****Table 1**

Easiness and usefulness of using the 4English application

Perception statements	Frequency (N=53)						
	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD
1. I think 4English is easy to access	18 (34)	28 (52.8)	7 (13.2)	0	0	4.19	.652
2. I can use 4English without others' directions	11 (20.8)	31 (58.5)	7 (13.2)	4 (7.5)	0	3.92	.805
3. I think 4English is a useful approach of studying English outside the classroom	20 (37.7)	25 (47.2)	7 (13.2)	1 (1.9)	0	4.21	.743

(Notes: SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree)

Table 1 revealed that most participants showed positive attitudes while using 4English. A large number of the participants agreed that 4English was easy to use without directions. In particular, 42 students (or 79.3%) concurred with the idea of being able to use 4English independently, and 46 students (or 87%) thought that 4English provided convenience in accessing the platform. Significantly, the highest mean of this theme ($M = 4.21$) indicated that 4English was a useful method to learn English outside the classroom.

Overall, the high percentage of agreement and mean score indicated that the 4English application was both accessible and useful for students' learning needs. The data suggested that students perceived the application as useful in providing a convenient learning experience outside the traditional classroom setting.

Table 2

Students' reading engagement and perceived benefits of using 4English

Perception statements	Frequency (N=53)						
	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD
4. I practice reading through 4English	11 (20.8)	33 (62.3)	6 (11.3)	3 (5.7)	0	3.98	.747
5. I think 4English motivates me to read news in English	7 (13.2)	30 (56.6)	14 (26.4)	1 (1.9)	1 (1.9)	3.77	.767
6. I learn new vocabulary to support understanding written English through 4English	13 (24.5)	37 (69.8)	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	0	4.17	.580
7. After using 4English, I can understand most of the words in one sentence while reading English texts	8 (15.1)	30 (56.6)	12 (22.6)	2 (3.8)	1 (1.9)	3.83	.849
8. I think using 4English helps improve my academic scores in VLU's reading courses	8 (15.1)	35 (66)	8 (15.1)	1 (1.9)	1 (1.9)	3.91	.741

(Notes: SD: Strongly Disagree; D: Disagree; N: Neutral; A: Agree; SA: Strongly Agree)

Table 2 demonstrated students' reading engagement and perceived benefits of using 4English. The data showed that the highest mean was 4.17, indicating that using 4English could enrich their vocabulary. The expanded vocabulary was likely the most significant benefit, as it could have the greatest impact on participants' reading abilities. Additionally, 83% of students considered it a tool to practice reading comprehension, which engaged them with reading activities.

Besides, they also stated that using 4English improved their ability to comprehend nearly all the vocabulary within an English sentence (38/53 or 71.7%). Finally, using 4English has a positive effect on their perceived reading performance at VLU (81.1%).

Another point is that the response to the idea that 4English motivated participants to read English news is 69.8% (37 of 53 students), while over 26% of the participants were neutral. In general, it can be seen that the 4English application is well-received by the majority of participants for effectively developing their reading proficiency.

Research question 2: Students' Challenges in Using 4English for Reading Practice

To answer research question 2, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with five participants. The data were then presented and discussed based on encoded keywords from the students' perspectives.

Interview question: "What are the challenges you faced while using 4English to practice your reading skills?"

Through this process, three major themes emerged: (1) advanced vocabulary challenges, (2) interface limitations, and (3) financial barriers. Representative excerpts from the interviews were selected to illustrate each theme and support the interpretation of the findings.

Advanced Vocabulary Challenges

The application is effective for improving my reading comprehension, but its vocabulary level is often too advanced for beginners. (Student 1, interview extract)

I appreciate the variety of vocabulary available, but it's quite challenging for beginners to understand the content. (Student 2, interview extract)

Interviewees appreciated the extensive range of vocabulary available in the application, regarding it as a valuable resource for expanding their lexical knowledge and enhancing their reading comprehension. However, the interviewees showed that the vocabulary in the application was too advanced for their current English level, which created a gap between the linguistic demands of the content and their existing vocabulary knowledge. This may increase learners' cognitive load because they need to make substantial effort to understand unfamiliar words before they can focus on comprehending the reading content.

Interface Limitations

The interface is decent but not as attractive or engaging as other popular language learning applications like Duolingo. It contains a lot of text and lacks engaging images, which can make the learning experience less appealing. (Student 3, interview extract)

Adding more visuals and interactive elements could enhance user engagement and make the application more effective for learners. (Student 4, interview extract)

While the interface is functional, the lack of engaging and interactive elements makes the learning experience less stimulating, potentially reducing the long-term use and effectiveness of the application. The finding suggested that students expected educational applications to provide experiences that were not only informative but also interactive. Features such as gamification, personalized challenges, or interactive exercises may help increase their sense of involvement and accomplishment.

Financial Barriers

The free version of the application does not allow access to all materials, which limits its usefulness. (Student 5, interview extract)

I hesitate to buy the PRO version to access all the features of the application since I'm still a student with limited financial resources. (Student 2, interview extract)

The finding showed that the free version significantly limited the accessibility and usefulness of the application, as many students were unable to afford the PRO version, thereby restricting their ability to fully utilize all the features and materials available.

To explore this further, the researcher asked a follow-up question: "Which limitations of the free version affect your reading practice the most?"

Frequent pop-up advertisements were identified as the biggest problem because they interrupted students' reading. As Student 2 explained, *"The advertisements appeared too often, and they distracted me while I was reading."* Similarly, Student 5 answered, *"The pop-up ads were annoying because they interrupted my concentration when they appeared."*

To sum up, while the free version was still useful, financial barriers and ads prevented students from fully experiencing the application's advanced learning features.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that 4English serves as a useful tool for facilitating autonomous reading practice beyond the formal classroom environment. Participants characterized the application as intuitive and user-friendly, requiring neither specialized technical instruction nor rigorous external supervision to be effective. This ease of use facilitates independent learning, as it lowers the barrier to entry for extracurricular engagement.

Data gathered from active users revealed highly positive attitudes toward vocabulary acquisition during the practice process. These results align with the work of Abdollahpour and Maleki (2012), who showed the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in improving vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the current study reinforces the findings of Basoglu and Akdemir (2010), whose research indicated that mobile-based learning systems could facilitate enhanced vocabulary acquisition in comparison to conventional resources, such as physical flashcards. However, a notable contribution of this study lies in the participants' greater awareness of reading strategies. By taking ownership of their learning process, students were becoming more independent learners. Consequently, this shift toward self-regulated learning suggests that 4English provides an auxiliary pathway to improved reading ability.

In comparison to Vu et al. (2023), the current study aims to explore the subject of English-major students while they focus on a secondary education context (10th graders). As a result, beyond the common positive attitudes toward using the app to improve reading skills, the current research reveals more difficulties faced by the participants, such as advanced vocabulary challenges, interface limitations, and financial barriers. These findings suggest that students' experiences with the application include both perceived benefits and practical constraints. Moreover, Vu et al. (2023) recommend that the app should be adopted to engage students in reading activities in class, whereas this study suggests that 4English can serve as an auxiliary tool for reinforcing reading comprehension beyond the classroom.

While the current study demonstrates the potential of 4English as a useful tool for autonomous reading and vocabulary acquisition, several avenues for future investigation remain. Given that the lack of gamified engagement and the restricted content of the application's free version may result in intermittent usage, future research should explore the long-term sustainability of student engagement with non-premium mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools. Specifically, further studies could investigate the role of goal-setting interventions in mitigating "aimless learning." Research is needed to determine whether providing students with structured frameworks for identifying specific learning objectives—such as targeted vocabulary

expansion or specific comprehension benchmarks—significantly enhances their persistence and motivation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine the relationship between regular self-assessment and academic performance. Understanding how students' metacognitive awareness of their progress influences their consistent use of the application would provide deeper insights into the transition from passive users to self-regulated, independent learners. Finally, future inquiries might compare the effectiveness of 4English across different proficiency levels to see if the "limited materials" barrier affects advanced learners differently than beginners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the opinions of VLU's English-majored students towards the use of 4English to self-practice reading comprehension skills. By collecting data on students' points of view, the research provides a clearer picture of how 4English users find that it effectively assists their learning process. On the whole, students had positive perspectives on the effectiveness of 4English. Most participants were satisfied with its user-friendly interface and accessibility benefits. Moreover, it is acknowledged for enhancing students' English-studying process, as reflected in their self-reported perceptions. The majority of participants noted significant improvements in their vocabulary enrichment, which led to a better understanding of an English sentence. Accordingly, they perceived that the application had a positive impact on their performance in Reading subjects at the university.

Despite these benefits, the application also presents several challenges, as identified in research question 2. The vocabulary level is often too advanced for beginners, making it difficult for them to understand the content. Additionally, the application's interface, while functional, lacks the engaging elements found in other popular language learning applications. Financial barriers and ads also pose a significant challenge because the free version does not provide access to all materials and disrupts reading, which limits its usefulness for students with budget constraints. These limitations can cause students to feel less enthusiastic and discouraged.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that 4English be used as an effective tool for learning English outside the classroom. Students can also use the app to improve their reading skills. It is also suggested that the usefulness of the 4English application in learning English should be further explored to maximize the benefits and overcome the application's limitations in English learning.

Limitations and further research

The study has certain limitations in terms of its research methodology. This is a small-scale study with the engagement of only 53 English-majored students at VLU. Thus, the findings cannot be extended to a larger population. Moreover, only self-reported data were used. Hence, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted with larger sample sizes, with a focus on students' learning motivation and learner autonomy, while using 4English to assess English reading ability, to yield more reliable and in-depth findings in this area. Future studies can implement 4English into action research to examine its effects on reading comprehension.

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Biodata

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