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EFL Instructors' Perceptions of Utilizing Mobile-Assisted Language Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Introduction: One of the prominent approaches in language education is Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) due to recent advances in technology. To benefit from MALL effectively and develop it when it is required, it is important to know the perceptions of the ones who use it. Although much research related to students' and teachers' perceptions of MALL in primary and secondary education is present in the literature, research related to perceptions of instructors in higher education is limited. Thus, this study aimed at identifying the instructors' perceptions of utilizing MALL in higher education.

Methods: As the perceptions of the participants were aimed to be explored in detail, the qualitative research design was adopted. An open-ended questionnaire was developed by the researchers and administered to 24 instructors working at the English Language Teaching (ELT) departments of different universities in Turkey. The data were analyzed through content analysis.

Results: It was found that the instructors defined MALL as using mobile technologies for language learning. Moreover, the participants had positive perceptions about MALL as it had some benefits, such as anytime, anywhere learning, stronger students' interest, higher motivation and autonomy, individualized and collaborative learning. However, MALL users faced some challenges, such as weak internet connection and battery, time consumption in terms of preparing content for the class, classroom management problems and low digital literacy of both students and instructors.

Discussion: The results of the study were parallel to the findings of the previous studies in the literature. This study found that MALL contributed to learning independent of time and place, high motivation and interest, saving time and energy, individualized learning, collaborative learning, autonomous learning, and learning with fun.

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Limitations: This study is not without limitations. Triangulation of data with in-depth interviews could be implemented to increase detailed information and reliability.
Conclusions: The results of the study showed that instructors who had benefitted from technology in their teaching process had positive perceptions despite some challenges. To this end, it is suggested that MALL be utilized in language teaching by minimizing its challenges.

Key words: mobile-assisted language learning, EFL instructors, higher education, perception

Introduction

Educational approaches and applications are affected by what is going on in the world. One of the latest examples of this is the COVID-19 pandemic which has affected all societies in all fields including education. Due to a long recess in schools, education has to be realized in online environments. Thus, the importance of integrating technology into education has been understood more than ever. Being one of the approaches that unify technology and pedagogy, mobile learning has become more of an issue as it provides learning "anytime and anywhere" (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) which seems to be what we need nowadays.

Apart from the "rescuer" end of mobile learning (m-learning) during the pandemic, its characteristics make it necessary to consider using it in language learning classes. As m-learning "exploits the spontaneous and opportunistic nature of learning on the move" (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005, p. 31), it may make learning a language easier. Mobile learning takes the name of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) when it is adapted to language education. MALL can be seen as a shift from Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Emerging in 1983 (Chapelle, 2001), the term CALL was defined as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (Levy, 1997, p. 1). It is a process where learners improve their foreign language by using a computer (Beatty, 2003). Although it has affected language learning and teaching profoundly, it has undergone an important change due to portable devices that have removed the limitations of sitting in front of a computer in a determined time and environment. Innovations in technology and pedagogy got the behaviorist structure of the first CALL and gave place to integrative CALL (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Siemens (2005) stated that people's way of working and functioning changed when new devices were employed. Thus, new concepts such as Technology Enhanced Language

Learning (TELL) (Bush & Terry, 1997) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning have emerged. MALL differs from CALL "in its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access across different contexts of use" (Kukulska-Hulme & Shields, 2008, p. 273) but it "mirrors m-learning as they both focus on contextualized learning, flexibility and active community participation of the learner" (Çakmak, 2019, p. 37).

MALL is defined as "any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies" (O'Malley et al., 2005, p. 6). It is using mobile devices such as smart-phones in the language learning process in which portability and situated learning are advantageous (Kukulska-Hulme, 2018). It provides learning a language without the limitations of place and time; in other words, anytime and anywhere. The term "assisted language learning" in MALL was criticized by Jarvis and Achilleos (2013) as conscious learning was insufficient to describe it and the term of Mobile-Assisted Language Use abbreviated as MALU was suggested. MALU is "non-native speakers [sic] using of a variety of mobile devices in order to access and/or communicate information on an anywhere/anytime basis and for a range of social and/or academic purposes" (p. 9). Although unconscious learning in MALL is a good point to be addressed, the learning process has many other dimensions except for technology. Thus, technology still assists language learning no matter how much it is penetrating into our educational lives day by day.

The related literature indicates that MALL can be utilized in foreign language learning for various aims such as developing linguistic skills of learners. Some research shows that it is effective to improve vocabulary (Ağca & Özdemir, 2013; Başoğlu & Akdemir, 2010; Chen & Chung, 2008; Çavuş & İbrahim, 2009; Lu, 2008; Okumuş Dağdeler, 2018; Stockwell, 2007, 2010; Zhang, Song, & Burston, 2011), speaking (Ataeifar, Sadighi, Bagheri, Behjat, & Wang, 2019; Hadi & Emzir, 2016; Tonekaboni, 2019), reading (Chang & Hsu, 2011), listening (Gaber, 2015; Huang & Sun, 2010; Hwang & Chen, 2013), writing (John & Yunus, 2019; Li & Hegelheimer, 2013), grammar (Baleghizadeh & Oladrostam, 2010; Khodabandeh, Alian, & Soleimani, 2017; Rozina, Shima, Rahmah, & Hafiza, 2017) and pronunciation (Arashnia & Shahrokhi, 2016; Ardi, 2017; Saran, Seferoğlu, & Çağıltay, 2009). Moreover, it is important in terms of some affective behaviors such as learner autonomy (Gaber, 2015; Leis, Cooke, & Tohei, 2015; Lyddon, 2016), motivation (Lawrence, 2015; Sandberg, Maris, & de Geus, 2011), self-efficacy (Yorgancı, 2017), and readiness (Mahat, Ayub, & Luan, 2018; Shuib, Azizan, & Ganapathy, 2018). These studies addressing one of the dimensions of language learning indicate the possible contributions of

MALL to language education. It is also essential to know how the users such as students and teachers perceive MALL. Thus, some research has been done to see teachers' and students' beliefs about MALL in primary and secondary education (e.g., Azli, Shah, & Mohamad, 2018; John & Yunus, 2019; Steel, 2012). However, higher education is still needed to be investigated.

1 Literature review

The studies carried out in higher education are generally oriented to the students. The number of studies about instructors' perceptions of MALL in higher education is limited. Findings of research on both the students' and instructors' perceptions of MALL were presented below (e.g. Hişmanoğlu, Ersan, & Çolak, 2017; Saidouni & Bahloul, 2016).

The review of the literature shows that English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' attitudes towards MALL are mainly positive. They believe that MALL is a valuable asset for language learning (Jimenez, 2019). MALL is favorable among EFL learners as it provides learning anytime and anywhere. EFL learners are glad to be able to discuss online whenever and wherever they want (Yang, 2012) and benefit from their smartphones and iPads before, during and after classes for different activities (Kwangsawad, 2019). Students feel comfortable learning through mobiles both inside and outside the classroom (Ali et al., 2010). Both the technical features of mobile devices and mobile applications related to language learning provide personalized and individual learning. Mobile devices are designed technically for individual use. On the other hand, mobile applications providing socializing, such as WhatsApp, and many language applications enhance collaborative learning. This feature of MALL is appreciated by EFL learners. They explain that MALL promotes working individually and also collaboratively (Yang, 2012; Yudhiantara & Nasir, 2017). MALL is found beneficial also in terms of motivation, language awareness, immediate feedback, autonomy, access to various materials (Deng & Shao, 2011; Klimova & Polakova; 2020; Nino, 2015; Okumuş Dağdeler, 2018; Perez-Paradez et al., 2019; Soleimani et al., 2014). Moreover, EFL learners develop good attitudes towards MALL as they believe that it develops their speaking, listening, reading skills, phonological knowledge and information about the culture of target language Aatefari et al., 2019; Saidouni & Bahloul, 2016; Yudhiantara & Nasir, 2017). On the other hand, Hsu (2013) has found that learners think that not all linguistic skills can be developed only through mobile devices. Similarly, the study of Nami (2020) has concluded that all language skills cannot be practiced equally via mobile applications.

On the contrary to these positive attitudes, the participants in the study of Fujimoto (2012) have expressed negative feelings about using mobile devices for educational purposes due to screen size, cost of mobile devices and limited

functions of mobile devices. Like many other technological devices, mobile devices have also some weaknesses and MALL also has its limitations. The weaknesses of mobile devices that EFL learners utter mostly are a low duration of the mobile battery, the problem of storing big data and small screen size (Al-Said, 2015; Aygül, 2019). Jimenez (2019) argues that learners' preferences for mobile devices should be taken into consideration; not every mobile device should be used. Moreover, some pedagogical concerns such as distraction make learners uncertain about the usage of MALL. The participants of Kwangsawad (2019) study note that there should be strict rules so that students cannot misuse mobile devices.

The research shows that pre-service English teachers, who will be the practitioners of language teaching process, know what the term MALL means. Nariyati et al., 2020). Pre-service teachers regard MALL as learning "anywhere and anytime" which is the definition of Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008), who are one of the scholars that have contributed much to the conceptualization of mobile learning. MALL removes the limitation of time and place according to the pre-service teachers (Öz, 2014) and it provides ubiquitous learning (Pourabad, 2016). On the other hand, pre-service teachers are sceptical due to some challenges of using MALL, such as lack of mobile devices, internet connection and low digital literacy (Öz, 2014; Pourabad, 2016). Some pre-service teachers consider mobile phones as a dangerous factor leading to addiction while most of the participants explain positive opinions regarding mobile phones as useful and entertaining devices which are parts of daily life (Şenel, 2016). Mobile devices provide authentic, ubiquitous, easy and enjoyable language learning according to 142 pre-service English teachers (Aygül, 2019). Similarly, in-service English teachers have positive perceptions of MALL thanks to its benefits, such as facilitation of learning, portability, time-efficiency, and ubiquitous learning (Dashtestani, 2013). Interestingly, teachers do not utilize mobile devices in their courses although they have good attitudes towards them. Hişmanoğlu et al. (2017), who have sought the opinions of instructors working in universities' preparatory programs on MALL, have found that instructors believe that MALL develops communicative skills, but they are uncertain in using it in EFL teaching. This doubt can generate from some limitations of MALL, such as the difficulty of controlling students, lack of knowledge about technology use and distraction of learners' attention.

The previous research shows that there is still a need for understanding the practitioners of MALL in higher education. It is observed that there are some studies investigating students' perceptions of MALL; however, studies focusing on instructors' perceptions are rare. Thus, this study aimed at identifying ELT instructors' perceptions of the utilization of MALL in higher education. The

research question of the study is as follows: How do EFL/ESL instructors perceive utilizing MALL in higher education?

2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach aims to interpret how humans who are the actors of the world perceive the world (Glesne, 2012). The focus of this study was to identify the perceptions of instructors.

2.1 Study group

The study group of this research consisted of 24 instructors working at different universities in Turkey. These instructors work in the department of English Language Teaching. The demographic information about the study group was given in the table below.

Table 1

Demographic information of study group

		f
Gender	Female	13
	Male	11
Age	29-32	10
	34-50	9
	51-65	5
Title	Prof.	4
	Assoc.	4
	Assist Prof. Dr.	8
	Lecturer	6
	Research Assistant	1
	Other	1
Teaching years	1-5	4
	6-10	8
	11-15	3
	16+	9

The table shows that most of the participants were female (f=13) and young mostly at the ages of between 29 and 32 (f=10), and 34 and 50 (f=9). There were five participants whose ages ranged between 51 and 65. As the academic title of the study group was examined, it was seen that there was diversity. Professors (f=4), associate professors (f=4), assistant professors (f=8), lecturers (f=6) and research assistant (f=1) were included in the study group. The teaching experience of the study group was high as nine participants were teaching

English for more than 16, 8 participants for 6-10 years, 4 participants for 1-5 years and 3 participants for 11-15 years.
The study group was asked whether they used technology in their classes and it was seen that all of the participants used it as can be seen in Figure 1.

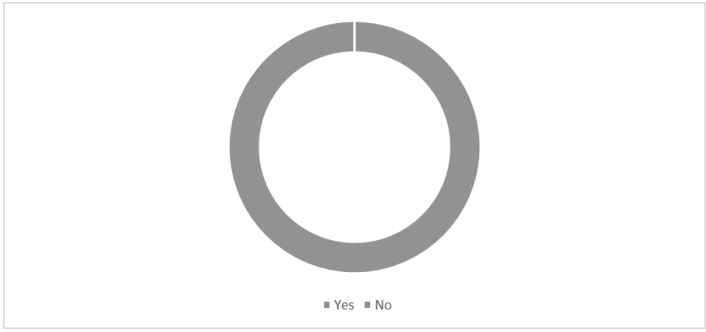


Figure 1. Do you benefit from technology when teaching English?

The types of technological devices that the instructors used in their classes were asked and the answers were presented in Figure 2.

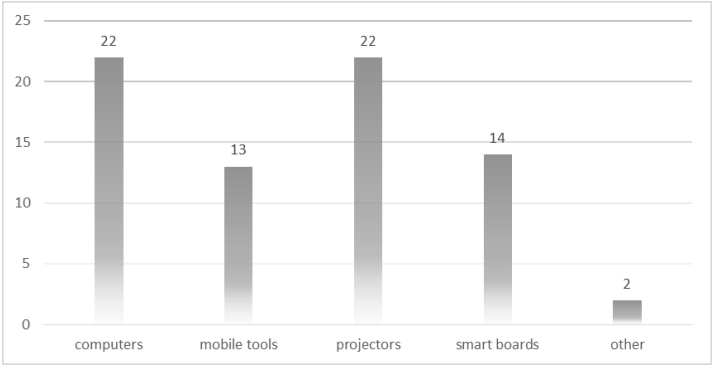


Figure 2. Technological devices.

Figure 2 shows that most of the participants used computers (f=22) and projectors (f=22) when teaching English. The number of those using mobile tools (f=13) and smart boards (f=14) was more than half of the participants.
The instructors' preference for instructional technology materials for language educations was as follows:

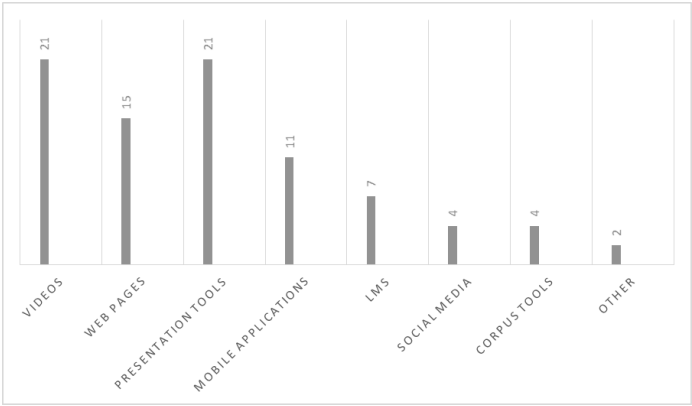


Figure 3. Instructional technology materials.

Figure 3 indicates that nearly all of the participants used videos (21) and presentation tools (21) such as PowerPoint and Prezi for language education. Most of the participants benefitted from different online sites (15) while some of them preferred mobile applications (f=11), Learning Management systems (LMS) (7), social media (4) and corpus tools (f=4).

2.2 Data collection tools

An open-ended questionnaire was prepared by the researchers. This questionnaire was sent to 2 experts of both English language and methodology of scientific research to get expert opinions. Then, the questionnaire was sent to 2 academics working at English language teaching departments for piloting. Both expert opinions and pilot participants showed that not many revisions were required on the questionnaire except for some grammatical mistakes. Thus, the questionnaire was sent to 71 instructors working at different universities in an online platform. By keeping in mind that the response rate could be low in online surveys, the questionnaire was sent to 71 academics although it was a high number for a qualitative research study. 24 instructors responded to the online survey and all of them were included in the data analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

To analyze data, content analysis in which a coding system was developed was used. A coding system involves searching through the data for finding regularities, patterns and topics and then writing down words and phrases to represent these patterns and topics (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data were coded by the researchers. The frequency of codes was found and presented as

using numerical data in qualitative research to make some contributions to research such as helping researcher a) determine the diversity in the perceptions or beliefs of participants, b) provide evidence for his/her claims and interpretations c) make internal generalizability of researchers' claims (not of conclusions like in the quantitative research) and d) identify patterns which are not obvious in qualitative data that are not unquantified (Maxwell, 2010).

3 Results

The study group was asked what MALL meant to them and the answers were categorized as follows:

Table 2

Meaning of MALL

The meaning of MALL	*f*
Using mobile technology for language learning	13
Easiness while teaching	2
Motivation and usefulness	2
An opportunity to embed learning into the worlds of new generations	2
Innovation	2
A part of modern language learning	1
Using less stressful more practical data & input access for learning	1
A must in the courses for keeping up the technology	1
Learning in a fun way	1
Integrating real-life content into teaching	1

The table shows that most of the lecturers believed that MALL was integrating mobile technology in language learning. For example, Participant 7 defined MALL as follows:

"It can be broadly defined as using mobile devices when learning the target language."

The participants thought that MALL could be benefited in classes or outside classes. Some of the lecturers stated that it could be used both in and outside the class. The excerpts from some participants were as follows:

"MALL is integrating mobile phones into language learning both in and out of the classroom." (Participant 3)

"The students can use their mobile phones in and out of the classroom with the aim of learning." (Participant 4)

According to two lecturers, MALL was easy while teaching and it was motivating and useful. Again, two lecturers believed that MALL addressed the

new generation while teaching. Other perceptions related to the MALL were that it linked real life and teaching, and that it was a must in language learning and a part of modern language learning.

Although most of the lecturers used a general term like mobile tools, technology and devices *some* participants specified the type of mobile technology like mobile phones (f=4) and mobile applications (f=2). As analyzing the definitions of MALL for the participants, it was found that MALL was using mobile technology in language learning for the following aims:

Table 3

Aim of using MALL

Aims of using MALL	*f*
To enhance active learning	1
To share course-related materials	1
To give feedback before class time	1
To make the lesson more digital native friendly	1
To address the learners with diverse learning styles	1
To develop language skills	1
To save time	1

Table 3 shows that the participants utilized MALL with the aims of saving time, helping learners develop linguistic skills, promoting active learning, addressing learners with different types of learning styles, giving feedback, sharing materials with the learners, making the lessons digital native friendly.

It was asked what the benefits of integrating MALL into the classrooms were. Table 4 shows the thoughts of participants.

Table 4

Benefits of MALL

Benefits	*f*
Gets students interests to learning	7
Motivates the students	6
Provides autonomous learning	5
Provides reaching various resources and knowledge instantly for students	5
Makes giving feedback easier	3
Facilitates learning	3
Makes teaching and learning easier	3
Provides anywhere anytime learning	3
Provides learning in a fun way	3
Saves time and energy	3
Makes learner interact with course materials	1

Addresses different types of learners	1
Provides authentic language learning	1
Provides individualized learning	1
Provides collaborative learning	1

The results of the open-ended questionnaire indicated that there were many contributions of MALL according to the participants. The most addressed contribution was the attention-drawing dimension of MALL (f=7). The participants explained that using mobile devices got the interest of the students to the course. Some example excerpts were as follows:

"It helps draw students' attention and get rid of the boredom of traditional textbooks." (Participant 2)

"We can benefit from digital native students' interest in technology and turn [sic] into a learning tool." (Participant 5)

The other benefits of MALL that were addressed mostly by the participants were that it provided autonomous learning and motivated students. According to the participants, MALL…

"gives the students the opportunity to take the responsibility of their own learning." (Participant 12)

"is motivating both the teacher and students." (Participant 23)

The participants also believed that MALL provides *"anytime, anywhere learning"*, which can be seen as a de facto definition in the related literature (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). This ubiquity may lead to another benefit that participants explained. MALL helped the students to have fast access to the knowledge and various materials. Some statements of the participants were as follows:

"…For students, it helps to reach knowledge fast, follow their interest, receive instant feedback about their performance and increase their autonomous language learning." (Participant 20)

According to the participants, MALL saved time and energy and makes learning process easier for the teachers. As for the students, learning was funnier through MALL. While one participant believed that MALL provided individualized learning (Participant 21), for another participant (Participant 20), it was a collaborative way of learning.

Although there were many benefits of MALL, there were also some challenges of it as to the participants. Table 5 shows the challenges of using MALL for language learning and teaching.

Table 5

Challenges of MALL

Challenges	*f*
Internet connection problems	7
Preparing for the class (e.g. Finding the right application) is time-consuming	6
Limited technological skills of students and teachers	5
Learners might be distracted	5
Lack of appropriate mobile devices	4
Lack of appropriate applications and activities	2
The difficulty of controlling the learners	2
Electricity outage	1
Not user-friendly applications	1
Battery problems of mobile phones	1
Not suitable for activities requiring high order skills	1

Table 5 shows that there were some technical problems and some problems related to students and teachers. The technical problems included internet connection problems, lack of appropriate applications, electricity outage, not user-friendly applications, and battery problems. The problems originating from students included difficulty in controlling them, their possibility of distraction and limited technological skills. The other challenges that the instructors uttered were that preparing for the class was time-consuming, limited technological skills of teachers, lack of mobile devices and the inconvenience for activities requiring high order skills. Some examples were as follows:

"I am also interested in MALL and use some MALL-oriented activities, but the common problem is the internet connection and it is not very suitable for activities that require higher-order thinking skills. For example, I am taking this survey on my phone and typing is a bit difficult on the phone." (Participant 18)

"Most of the activities related to the [sic] MALL in the class are based on smart-phones, and they generally require an internet connection. Then, poor internet connection can be a major problem during an activity. If teaching activity [sic] is not well designed and engaging for students, the students can be easily distracted and might prefer to spend time surfing on the net or chatting on social media instead of studying English. Also, some students might have limited technologic [sic] skills and have cell phones not supporting the activity or application because of the mobile operating system. These issues can hinder the effective use of the [sic] MALL in the class." (Participant 21)

4 Discussion

Both students' and teachers' perceptions on using mobile technologies in language learning are important as it may help its improvements of implementations. However, the number of studies focusing on EFL instructors' perceptions of MALL in higher education is limited. Thus, this study tried to fill this gap and set to work by firstly asking how the instructors defined MALL. The answers showed that the instructors defined MALL as using mobile technology for language learning. This definition is parallel with the earlier definitions of mobile learning. M-learning was defined as any kind of learning happening through a mobile tool (Trifonova, 2003). Then, it was reformed as "learning mediated via handheld devices potentially available anytime, anywhere" (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008, p. 273). Although the participants of this study did not refer to this "anytime anywhere" feature of MALL in their definitions, they mentioned it while addressing the benefits of MALL. A few participants emphasized that MALL was learning outside and inside the classroom.

Some distinctive features of mobile learning, such as mobility of technology, learner, and learning (Kim & Kwon, 2012) ensure some distinctive benefits in terms of language learning. This study found that these benefits were that MALL contributed to learning independent of time and place, high motivation and interest, saving time and energy, individualized learning, collaborative learning, autonomous learning, and learning with fun. This finding was in line with the other perception studies in the literature. The literature showed that MALL was useful in terms of time-efficiency and ubiquitous learning (Dashtestani, 2013); individual and collaborative learning (Yang, 2012; Yudhiantara & Nasir, 2017), easy access to various educational materials (Soleimani et al., 2014), and motivation and autonomy (Perez-Paradez et al., 2019).

These distinctive features of MALL imply not only benefits but also some challenges. Some challenges that the participants of this study addressed were internet connection problem, low digital literacy of teachers and students, lack of mobile devices and applications, distraction, and difficulty of classroom management. This finding supported the findings of Hişmanoğlu et al., (2017), who explored teachers' perceptions of MALL in higher education. It was found that the main challenges of using mobile phones in language learning were lack of knowledge about technology, distraction and difficulty of managing learners.

While discussing these findings, it was kept in mind that 13 of 24 participants used mobile tools in their teaching process. When the responses of participants were examined one by one, it was seen that all participants thought that there were both benefits and challenges of MALL. Thus, it was not observed a significant difference between the ones who used mobile tools and who did not in terms of positive or negative perceptions of MALL.

Conclusion

This study investigated the beliefs of instructors about the utilization of MALL in higher education. The results showed that instructors who had benefitted from technology in their teaching process had positive perceptions despite some challenges. Thus, it is suggested that MALL be utilized in language teaching by minimizing its challenges. To minimize those challenges a) some rules can be set to decrease the misuse of mobile devices (Kwangsawad, 2019), b) students' and teachers' awareness of MALL and its efficiency can be raised (Saidouni & Bahloul, 2016), and c) both teachers and students can be trained about technology use.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to the literature by examining the perceptions of practitioners who are educating future English teachers. This is important as pre-service teachers should "prepare themselves to teach in the digital era" (Nariyati et al., 2020, p. 44). Thus, it is required to see what the educators of pre-service teachers think about teaching with technology. Despite the contributions, this study is not without limitations. Triangulation of data collection tools with in-depth interviews could be provided to increase detailed information and reliability, which is suggested for further research.

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