Mobile-assisted English language learning for young learners during COVID-19 distance learning: Teachers' experiences and voices

Misdi¹, Anisa Andiani Ramadina², Nor Syamimi Iliani Che Hassan³, Kardi Nurhadi⁴

¹,²Universitas Swadaya Gunung Jati, Indonesia
³Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia
⁴Universitas Wiralodra, Indonesia

*) Corresponding Author
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Abstract
Despite many previous studies investigating online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, more needs to be reported about TEYL teachers' insightful experiences in photovoice. To fill this gap, the current phenomenological case study aimed at exploring TEYL teachers' experiences in enacting MALL during the distance learning period amidst the COVID-19 pandemic using photovoice. Two teachers were recruited as the study participants. The data were garnered from the participants' photovoice collections depicting critical incidents and interviews. The results showed that MALL was perceived as a powerful instructional method in distance English learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers reported that they encountered several obstacles caused by unstable internet networks, difficulty in direct supervision of young learners, and the requirement of extra effort to prepare interesting teaching materials. On a positive note, MALL has benefited the teachers by enriching their experiences using various mobile applications for their English language instructions. The enactment of MALL has also foregrounded parents' important roles in monitoring their children's use of mobile devices. Drawing from the findings, this research implies that
photovoice can be used to explore teachers' and students' live experiences with distance learning in Indonesian teacher education.

**Keywords:** distance learning, elementary school, English teachers’ experience, mobile-assisted language learning, teaching English to young learners, photovoice

**INTRODUCTION**

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, Indonesia implemented a lockdown in all public places, including schools. Based on the Circular of the Ministry of Education and Culture Number 15 of 2020, school teaching and learning activities should be replaced with online teaching and learning from home during the emergency period. This effort was carried out to fulfil students' rights to receive education, protect children, prevent COVID-19 transmission in academic units, and provide psychosocial support for educators, students, and parents. Therefore, home support is essential to assist students' learning (Lau & Lee, 2020; Sukmawati & Tanjak, 2020); at the same time, teachers and students need proper communication tools to interact in the remote teaching and learning process, which leads to the adoption of mobile devices (Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017; Noris & Kukulska-Hulme, 2016). Smartphones are now widely used as language learning aids. They can be connected to the Internet and supported by specific applications available as default or downloaded for free or a certain fee.

Generally, the use of mobile devices in language learning is often called as mobile-assisted language learning (hereafter MALL). MALL is also employed in the instruction of English for young learners. Teaching English to young learners using technology is one of the toughest challenges. These are contributed by complexities in dealing with learning techniques, media utilization, linking learning time to application time, and critical mental and social factors affecting instructors' inspiration (Puncrrobutr, 2016; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). English teachers often face these challenges in primary schools, especially in Indonesia. In dealing with these issues, English teachers must skillfully teach using assistive technology, and MALL is mainly considered an effective method (Nuraeni, 2021). MALL is something to be aware of when teaching English to young learners. Furthermore, young learners cannot be compared to middle school-aged students who are more
independent in managing their learning. Some issues may arise during the enactment of MALL such as young learners' psychological preparation, smartphone accessibility, internet stability, and teachers' readiness. As reported in Nuraeni's (2021) findings, suitable strategies should be justified within the contexts to establish an attractive and fruitful MALL enactment for young learners.

Before the current studies, several studies have been conducted in the areas of MALL (Shadiev et al., 2021; Gorbani & Ebadi, 2020), students' perception of MALL (Putri, 2020), online learning toward learning motivation (Lamb & Arisandy, 2019; Gorbani & Ebadi, 2020), parents' involvement in online learning (Kalayci & Ergül, 2020), Pratiwi et al., 2020), MALL and teachers' instructional professionalism (Mohsenishad et al., 2020). Putri (2020) investigated the enactment of MALL during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine students' perceptions of MALL. Her study findings revealed that MALL has significantly positively impacted the student's learning outcomes. In addition, this study demonstrated how various smartphone applications used in language learning and instruction could benefit students. The applications are Google Translate, Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Gmail, U-Dictionary, Google, Camscanner, Oxford Dictionary of English, English Thesaurus, English Grammar, Irregular and Regular Verb, Offline Dictionary, and My Dictionary for vocabulary enrichment and re-meaning activities. The findings based on the students' virtual speaking performances also revealed that their speaking abilities were enhanced.

Online learning viewed from another perspective, i.e., parents, was also investigated and reported by Kalayci and Ergül (2020). The results showed that parental involvement and their manners in the teaching and learning process of the English language have an equal impact. This study provides an example of how parents must support their children's language development intellectually and emotionally. Other findings from this study revealed that 72% of teachers required more training in family involvement. They contended that training for lifelong learning is vital for teachers. They also demonstrated that teachers must develop to support students' second language acquisition in various ways.
Pratiwi et al. (2020) reported English pre-service teachers’ perception of using MALL. The findings of this study demonstrated that pre-service EFL teachers believed that mobile-assisted language learning facilitated English language learning by providing ubiquitous access to a wealth of information about educational content. It makes it easier for teachers to create resources using mobile technologies. Moreover, in the digital age, pre-service English teachers in this study recommended enhancing their familiarity and proficiency with mobile technologies.

Despite numerous studies on utilizing MALL in teaching English to young learners (e.g., Bozkurt, Kilgore & Crosslin, 2018; Lee, 2019; Shadiev et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2017), exploring how elementary English teachers express their live experiences in teaching English to young learners using photovoice remains underexplored. Given the relative paucity of research using photovoice as a data collection tool in the Indonesian context, this research aimed to explore TEYL teachers’ experiences, including a sense of something experienced on enacting MALL situated in a teaching English to young learners’ landscape.

RESEARCH METHOD

Designs

A phenomenological case study that slightly modifies photovoice was used in this current study. A photovoice was employed to uncover the phenomenon and to describe participants, where the participants independently shot images that served as a leading source of information. Photovoice is suitable for reducing the gap between researchers and participants (Sitter, 2017). Photovoice data is rich due to the use of metaphors that allow participants to elaborate their ideas and for other participants to add their insights. The photos taken by participants are teaching obstacles, teaching processes, and teacher responses, which are depicted symbolically (Wass et al., 2020). The participants articulated an account of their critical incidents during their enactment of MALL in teaching English to young learners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in private elementary schools in Indonesia. To the best of the author’s knowledge, the schools at the site of the study are the best private
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schools in the region that run for international-content curriculum (national plus curriculum) with English as an elective subject.

Participants

The participants were English teachers at elementary schools in Cirebon City. All participants who met the criteria of having experiences with and enacting MALL were recruited and voluntarily participated in the study. Before joining the research project, all participants were informed of the research aims, procedure, and their rights as participants according to the informed consent protocol published by the university where the research was affiliated. Researchers ensured that the participants could withdraw from the participation at any time during the project. They were also well informed that the data, including third-party photos and images shared, would be stored and saved in an online drive solely for research purposes for five years. Afterwards, all would be destroyed unless the participants decided differently. Their names would be anonymized for any publication.

Table 1. Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Names (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ages (years)</th>
<th>Teaching experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nita</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Two years of experience in teaching English. Had experience in implementing online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak. She received in-house training provided by the school to implement MALL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wendi</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Four years of experience in teaching English. Had experience in producing YouTube content and exposure to YouTube-mediated teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic. He had essential experience in implementing MALL.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To garner the relevant data from the participants, specific procedures were applied. First, twenty elementary schools which implemented English-distanced learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified and finally shortlisted into six research sites. Second, two elementary schools were selected as suitable research sites as they implemented distance learning using
MALL in their English learning. Third, researchers identified all the English teachers and negotiated before the current research. Finally, of six eligible school English teachers, two willingly participated in the research projects. The participant demographics are presented in the table 1.

**Data collection procedure**

The data of this current phenomenological case study were derived from photovoice and interview. This study took place in December, the second half of the 2021-2021 academic year semester, as the school was still conducting online learning. Following Wass et al. (2020) they agreed to share their photos via WhatsApp after establishing rapport with the participants. This was considered the most convenient way of communication to minimize direct contact following the Indonesian authorities’ COVID-19 protocols. Once the photos and images were received, the researcher arranged interview sessions with the participants to enquire about the photos. In the interview, the participants were asked the following questions: "What was the context of the photo?", "Why did you take this photo?" and "What does this photo mean to you?". In addition, the participants were also asked to write personal reflections on the photos related to themes emerged during the interview.

**Data analysis**

The interview data were transcribed and matched with the photovoice based on the guided questions. The transcribed data were coded and categorized according to the emerging themes using three stages (open, focused, and critical incident). Thematic inductive analysis, a qualitative analytical method, was applied as it has been frequently used to analyze photovoice data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Latz, 2017). When the transcription, coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis were completed, the results were presented to the participants for confirmation. After the participants provided feedback on the results and confirmed that they matched what they experienced when teaching English to young learners using MALL, the final stage of interpretation and discussion began and completed.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**
MALL: Practical remote EFL learning device to facilitate learning

During their English language learning, smartphones facilitated their learning sessions. Moreover, the pandemic has proven that communication technology is essential for everyone. One of the communication technologies is smartphone which eases communication because of its relatively affordable price, small size, and equipped with many exciting features. Many features on MALL can be used to support EFL learning, such as video calling for two or more people, a forum for discussing and sending files, creating and answering questions, and many more.

Figure 1. YouTube videos used as vocabulary teaching materials for young learners

According to the participants, smartphones were essential for TEYL teachers, from applying learning materials, communicating with students, and taking assignment grades to the final evaluation of learning.

"Because I teach English to elementary school students using MALL, most of the teaching materials I provide are in the form of images combined with YouTube videos that can be accessed via smartphones."

(Participant 2)

Participant 1 also agreed that smartphones were the primary learning media. Smartphones were utilized in education as a learning and
communication tool between teachers and learners. Participant 1 explained that the students received the English language lesson well, even though it was not carried out directly in the classroom. Using smartphones as a learning medium, the participants taught young learners during the pandemic that hindered face-to-face learning. This was explained by participant 1:

"Yes, because we can communicate with students, give material and so on if without help by that (smartphone), learning process couldn’t work." (Participant 1)

The participants were grateful to connect with learners via smartphones during the pandemic. However, the learners had to be guided by their parents or guardians while using smartphones. The participants explained that even though online learning activities were finished or conducted outside teaching hours, they had to keep their smartphones active to respond to students who sent assignments by praising and answering any questions about them. All shared activities and tasks built-in digital formats, e.g., YouTube-assisted instruction (Wang & Chen, 2019), have made English language learning more enjoyable for young learners.

Learners’ social backgrounds enabled them to support synchronous or asynchronous meetings, and social media, e.g., WhatsApp, YouTube, and Google apps, which were used to deliver English materials. YouTube was chosen and considered suitable for young learners as it is a friendly medium for young learners to make learning activities fun and enjoyable (Chau, 2010; Wang & Chen, 2019). The teacher successfully applied YouTube-mediated instruction as an exciting video for his learners. He created and published short videos to match the learners’ conditions. This encouraged learners to be more engaged and active in commenting. Since the video lasted several minutes, it provided clear messages. Learning English using YouTube media successfully exposed learners to more authentic events than the media used in a face-to-face classroom. Therefore, it was easy to identify students who enjoyed watching and preferred this activity. They watched and comprehended the instruction and discussed it with their parents. In some cases, they completed the tasks.
themselves. Thus, as Jie and Sunze (2021) asserted, mobile-assisted English language learning can successfully promote self-directed learning.

**Vital roles of students' parents**

Elementary school students were highly dependent on their parents to assist them with their online assignments using smartphones as evident in Figure 1.

"So, because these students are still children, in learning to use smartphones, they still have to be accompanied by parents to operate smartphones used for online learning." (Participant 2)

Both participants agreed that parents must help their children to operate smartphones properly and be honest and responsible when learning through mobile-assisted language learning. The students of Participant 1 scored nearly perfect grades in examinations.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2.** A young learner assisted by her parent while attending a virtual English class using a smartphone.

"Some learners usually learn directly and get less and better grades when learning using MALL online. Nevertheless, we should not be prejudiced against our students, so I cannot be objective when using
MALL to learn online. This is proven by these learners requiring extra supervision when studying now when (face-to-face) classes have restored (and the pandemic has declined). Therefore, to encourage honesty for kids while learning using MALL online, teachers and parents must pay attention to them. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 also added that:

"Meanwhile, if the parents do not play a good role, they do not even let the child try to do it themselves; I feel upset for the student because I am worried that the student will not understand the learning material." (Participant 2)

In the online distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, learners and parents engaged in various activities to overcome stress concerning end-term examinations and excessive screen exposure. Thus, building a home environment that is conducive for effective learning is a must. Learners who were more confident in using the Internet for their coursework might have spent less time online; on the contrary, those who were not familiar with the Internet at all might need to spend more time going through the tasks required for the course (Kuo et al., 2013).

The findings confirmed that parents' roles are vital for online distance learning success. Hence, teaching English to young learners needs parents' assistance, for example, in navigating learning content effectively (Tocalo, 2022). To find relevant YouTube videos sent by the teachers, it needs parental guidance frequently. Often, parents need to supervise their children and consult to the teachers (Kalayci & Ergül, 2020) about such matters. The results revealed that parents help their children to comprehend assigned tasks and discuss answers.

Positive perception toward the MALL during online distance learning was influenced mainly by social support, e.g., parents' assistance (Gupta et al., 2021). This explains why the teachers showed parents' evidence as proof. Learners were interactive and communicative with their parents. This resulted in positive learning experiences. In this secure atmosphere, learning ran smoothly with concentration. Furthermore, the finding has identified learner-
parent enthusiasm as effective collaborative and fun learning by accessing the provided link, enjoying the videos, and receiving information and messages. Sometimes, learners had a chit-chat with their parents – a scenario that represented authentic learning. Learners may find it different in a context with less parental involvement.

**MALL: A platform to support EFL instructional creativity and innovation**

The participants must be creative when teaching kids, and one way they achieved this was by creating engaging videos for younger students who were naturally curious, energetic, and cheerful. Consequently, they would get bored more easily if they were forced to study without stimulating audio or visual aids.

"It has been two years we have experienced this pandemic period, and the learning process has moved through MALL online at home, so I, as a teacher, must be creative in dering learning so that it is not boring."

(Participant 2)

The two participants adopted different approaches to make educational films on YouTube, but they worked towards attaining the same goal of helping young learners understand in an entertaining and instructive way. Participant 1 created an educational video by recording himself, while participant 2 created the video by using animation.

Participant 1 created an educational video at the beginning of the class by recording himself pleasantly and cheerfully, pointing to a book page to the camera while explaining the content. He coached the students on pronunciation, word definition, and practice questions using textbooks while guiding them.
In the instructional video, participant 2 presented informative images in line with the learning subject and offered pronunciation examples for the images’ titles and an explanation of the image or terminology. To prevent learners from feeling bored while learning, the video also used humorous characters and vibrant colors.

"I made the video using the inshoot application using interesting characters in addition to teaching vocabulary pronunciation to my students using audio with voices from native speakers to avoid mistakes." (Participant 2)
The participants’ efforts to provide the best services for their learners through various instructional strategies naturally developed their instructional competence (Jie & Sunze, 2021). They were challenged with new insecure situations every time the learners faced difficulties. In response, they searched and opted to use another or adapt different teaching or learning strategies. All creativities and efforts of the participants in providing the best teaching performances and innovation have fruitfully led to the improvement and sharpened their pedagogical and instructional competencies.

**Barriers should not impede learning**

In general, young learners are active and often want to move around and play – this was one of the challenges the teachers encountered while trying to manage the class for learning. MALL frequently occurred in virtual meetings conducted through Zoom or Google Meet. When some young learners chit-chatted without muting their microphones, it disrupted the learning environment. Since the learning process must continue, the instructor would manage the issue by advising the students to remain calm and cooperative.

![Figure 5](image_url)

This is depicted in Figure 5.

**Figure 5.** Young learners’ disruptions during MALL

Both participants clarified that the only external obstacle the participants faced was caused by internet issues such as faulty connection or expired internet data. The participants still attended the online class since they could
access the Internet through the school’s Wi-Fi. Another barrier was that it could be more challenging to contact students who did not complete their tasks compared to when they were in class and actively engaged in learning. Participant 1 clarified this:

"The only problem is that the network is suddenly interrupted or the quota runs out" (Participant 1)

"The problems I have experienced are usually related to internet disconnection, but this usually only happens for a short time" (Participant 2)

In responding to questions about obstacles during the TEYL teaching, the participants asserted:

"Because I also like (playing/using) gadgets, so I do not find (obstacles) but the internet connection."

Participant 1 preferred actual learning by playing games outside and in the classroom. However, during the learning transition due to the pandemic, the participants could not do this; participant 1 replaced it by doing quizzes with students using YouTube videos. This is depicted in Figure 6.

**Figure 6.** Picture of video YouTube that Participant 1 used to do the quizzes as a substitute for the commonly face-to-face quizzes.
"That way, I replaced the games with quizzes, where I gave a YouTube video containing quiz questions in the chat column then students answered quickly; for students who answered correctly and the fastest, I gave gifts by sending food to their homes. That is what students like in learning. Students who can answer correctly or win in the game are given appreciation. So, I innovated a learning method according to their world, namely learning while playing." - Participant 1

Since quizzes could not be directly completed in the school environment setting, participant 1 managed to overcome this restriction by implementing MALL using YouTube that virtually offered enjoyable video quizzes. Hanny et al. (2021) reported how K12 (elementary schools) implemented online learning due to the Pre-Coronavirus condition. The findings showed that learners’ characteristics had also contributed to learning success. Thus, switching from face-to-face quizzes to YouTube-mediated quizzes as an alternative has invented new learning experiences for young learners.

**CONCLUSION**

This case study applied photovoice to identify several critical themes related to the perspective of TEYL teachers who implemented MALL during online distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The English teachers’ perspectives are summed up in some themes. The first subject focuses on all educational activities conducted utilizing MALL via smartphones. Primary English teachers must be digitally engaged to improve their innovative pedagogical competence following the ongoing trend of mobile-assisted learning. Secondly, parents are crucial in guiding young learners to use smartphones for educational purposes and providing parental advisory. The success or failure of learning is influenced by attitudes and role models set by parents at home (Zakiyya, 2022). The third element is that MALL allows English teachers, particularly English teachers of young learners, to foster creativity and innovation to make learning fun and fruitful for learners. This finding can be a model to help English teachers solve teaching difficulties, especially in online learning. The simple step-by-step instruction and parents’
supervision have shown that learning must continue despite the challenges in teaching English to young students. Thus, stresses and anxieties need to be addressed and maintained well to make young learners successfully engage in online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Recommendation for further research**

TEYL teachers' perceptions using MALL in teaching offer fellow educators insightful experiences. Despite the lack of stable Internet access, their instructional skills improved as they continuously invented new approaches and strategies during distance learning. They learned how to maintain their engagement with young learners using various techniques available in their contexts. Thus, we recommend further investigation of MALL to be carried out in a broader context of English instructional practices to examine various learning activities beyond learners' limitations in future learning.

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