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EFL Students' Attitudes towards Autonomous Learning through BUSUU: A Mobile Application

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Abstract*. Studies on the appliances of mobile phones have indicated a positive effect on language improvement. This case study attempts to clarify students' perceptions of autonomous learning through Busuu (a language mobile application). The subjects of this study were 17 females and three males of an English language center at a university in Indonesia. The result showed that the use of the Busuu app supported learners' autonomy. (1) Students controlled over learning management freely managing their time to study, and got motivated to learn English after accessing the app. The findings indicated that the lower the level of English competence, the longer students spent their time accessing the app. (2) Students controlled over cognitive processing by showing their interest in vocabulary practices. Next, students controlled over learning content by selecting which material to study first so that they could meet their expectations of accessing the app. Finally, (3) students controlled over learning strategies by reflecting on how well they have learned from the automated feedback feature provided in the app. To sum up, students have a positive attitude towards the app in that it helps them enhance their English proficiency skills, especially in vocabulary enrichment.*

Keywords*: autonomous learning; busuu, case study; language mobile application*

A. INTRODUCTION

The significantly developed technology improving individual and student-oriented learning is gaining momentum in EFL studies (Ahn & Lee, 2016;

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Castaneda & Cho, 2016; Hwang & Chen, 2013; Hwang, Shih, Ma, Shadiev, & Chen, 2016). Since smartphones were first launched, mobile applications (usually named as apps) are installed, offering educational resources such as language learning. As the apps need mobile devices to operate, the investigation of language learning apps is included in Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). These apps help users learn, practice, and enhance either language skills or knowledge where target languages are expressed (Rosell-Aguilar, 2009).

MALL offers EFL learners the attempts to undergo novel learning styles that go beyond the classroom setting, offering them more flexibility, options in terms of language content, ways of transfer, learning-setting, and time, thus developing autonomy (Djoub, 2014; Kukulska-Hulme, 2016). Benson proposed six broad headings in fostering autonomy practices, namely resource-based, technology-based, learner-based, classroom-based, curriculum-based, and teacher-based approaches. He defined learner autonomy as ‘a capacity to control learning.' The capacity includes ability, desire, and freedom. A dimension that students could control is learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Control over learning management is described as planning, organizing, and evaluating the learning process. Control over cognitive processing means understanding the conditions that assist language learning, such as attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge. Control over learning content means students know what and why they want to learn a particular subject. See figure 1 below.

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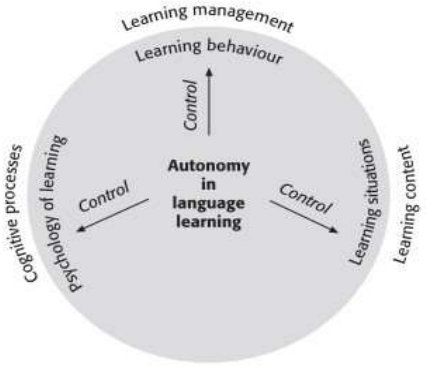

Figure 1. Dimensions of autonomous learning (Benson, 2011, p.61).

Language mobile applications are one of the MALL practices. A contemporary, widely used app in the world is Busuu. It has over 60 million recorded users. It provides 12 different languages classified into the level referred to as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. The app can be installed using Android and iOS operating systems. Users sign up and choose more than one language provided. They can also select either a free or premium membership. Some of the features included in Busuu app are vocabulary and grammar practices with translation, audio, and multiple practice exercises; audio recordings of each vocabulary item; translation of the vocabularies in 13 languages and grammar tips; and Busuu-talk (web only) which allow users to practice the language with native speakers.

Some studies of mobile phones related to autonomous learning have been conducted. Ketyi (2013) investigated 59 Hungarian students of German who were given a free 7-days premium membership trial. The service was well reported, with 79% of participants appraising it as either good or very good. However, after the free trial, 92% of respondents showed that they would not pay for the premium membership. In another

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study, Ketyi (2015) conducted experimental research and noted that the app motivates learners to improve their target language performance. Malerba (2015) also highlighted that students appreciated the flexibility of learning.

A study into the usage of Busuu was also conducted by Vesselinov and Grego (2016). They investigated the Spanish language developments of 144 autonomous learners using Busuu over two months with pre-and post-tests. It was noted that 84% of participants had enhanced their writing skills, and 75% had boosted their speaking skills. The most successful participants were those that took the longest time using the app. Issues such as age, gender, education level, ethnicity, native language, or motives in learning Spanish did not significantly impact. The study also noted users' satisfaction levels with very positive outcomes. Participants used both the web version (58%) and the app version (42%).

Experts have reported how MALL could impact student listening skills (Hwang et al., 2016), vocabulary recall (Hwang & Chen 2013), reading (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2007), listening (Hwang et al., 2016), speaking, and writing skill. However, a small number of studies only were conducted on how its usage impacts students' autonomous learning. This paper investigates the impact of selected mobile assisted language learning the application (Busuu) has on learner autonomy. The app functions both as a language learning application and social network service language learning (SNSLL). However, this research focused only on the application usage in mobile phones, not on the web version.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims at figuring out the use of chosen language learning mobile applications (Busuu) on students' autonomous learning. It was a case study conducted

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in an English language center of a university in Indonesia. The main questions this research sought to address are:

A. How do students control learning management using Busuu app to be autonomous learners?
B. How do students control cognitive processing using Busuu app to be autonomous learners?
C. How do students control learning content using Busuu app to be autonomous learners?

Population and Sample

Participants of this study were 17 female students and three male students enrolled in an English language center of a university in Indonesia. The researcher asked them to install the app and used it as a resource for language learning. The participants accessed the seven-day free trial Busuu app and completed the online survey afterward.

Instruments

Two instruments, namely interviews and questionnaires were adopted to determine students' attitudes towards autonomous learning through Busuu app, a language mobile application. The researcher asked students to install the app and used it as a resource for out-of-class language learning. Twenty participants accessed the seven-day free trial Busuu app and completed the online survey afterward. The online survey was adapted from a previous study into using an app for language learning (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). The questionnaires consisted of 16 questions, of which 15 were multiple-choice, and one was an open comment question (see Appendix A for full questionnaire). A total of 20 responses were collected, and all participants finished the survey. The only problem

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which did not receive complete answers was the open question regarding their further thoughts of the Busuu app. To gather more information, three participants were interviewed using a semi-structured schedule via the Instagram video chat feature.

Data Analysis

The results were first analyzed using the online survey of its statistic tool. They then studied them by the technique proposed by Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1984), namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. When it came to demonstrating data and information, the researcher displayed the data by bar graphs and pie charts. Having identified the questionnaires, the researcher gathered more data needed by conducting an interview.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews and questionnaires are presented here regarding the research questions. The data are illustrated in percentages and elaborated to find the conclusion. The researcher then verified the finding with the previous studies' results and theoretical review.

Findings

1. Control over Learning Management

Once the participants accessed the app, they needed to sign up and joined the placement test. The score of the test reflected their English proficiency level. Having been utilizing the 7 days free-trial access, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards Busuu, the language app. See the following figures, which illustrate the findings.

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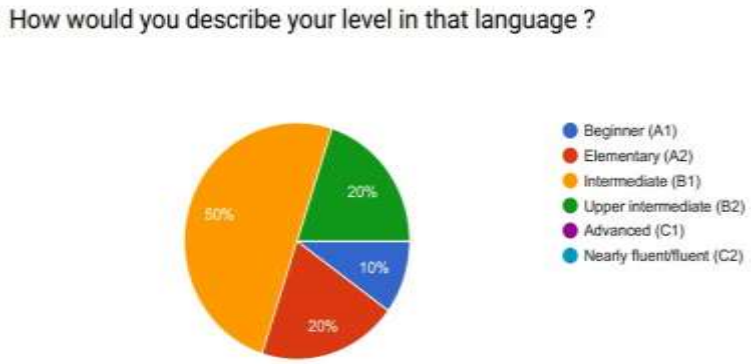

Figure 2. Participants' English proficiency levels

In figure 2 above, the result indicated that most respondents are Intermediate/B1 (50%), followed by Upper intermediate/B2 (20%) and elementary/A2 (20%), and beginner/A1 (10%). The respondents are varied in terms of English proficiency level. In addition, students who are either at advanced or nearly fluent English speakers were notably absent. To sum up, half of the students who participated in this research were at the intermediate level. The following figure illustrated how frequently those students access the app.

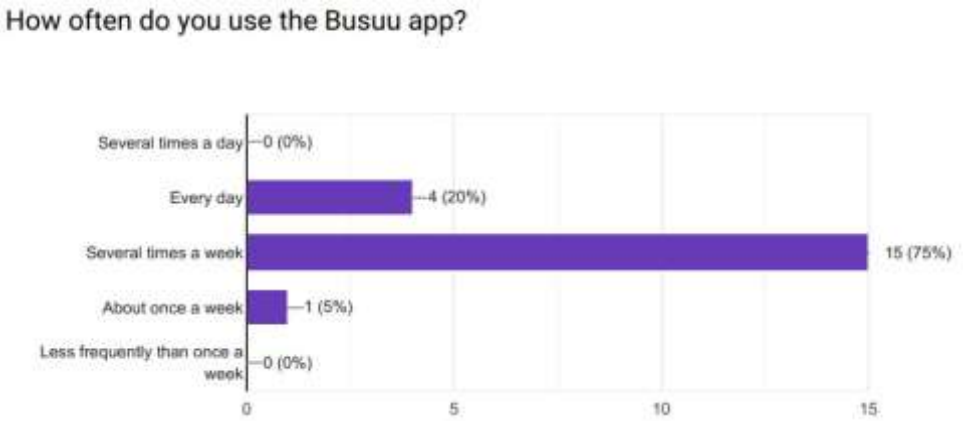

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Figure 3. Frequency of usage of Busuu app by participants

Regarding frequency, the participants accessed the Busuu app; figure 3 portraits the trend. A majority of participants utilized Busuu as their language learning mobile app several times a week. One fifth was recorded using the app every day, and a tiny proportion of students learned the language through the Busuu app once a week. It proved that the app had motivated students to study more as they spent more time accessing it.

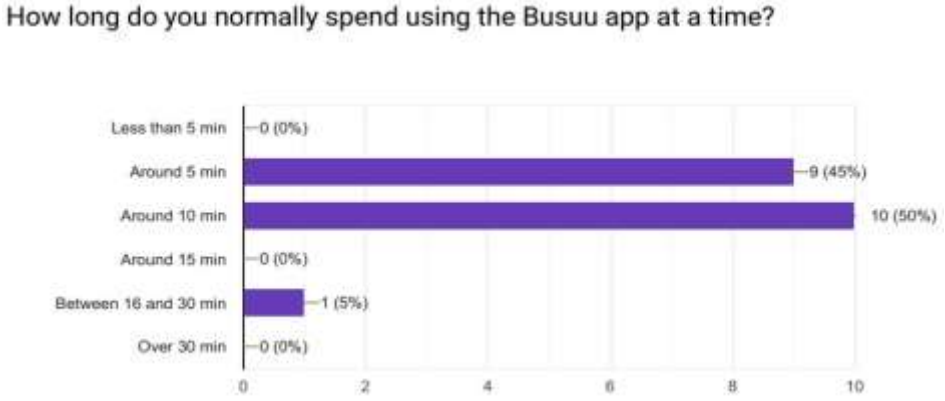

Figure 4: Frequency and length of usage of Busuu app by participants

With regards length of the time the students had been accessing the app, a significant number of respondents took advantage in between 5 (45%) and 10 (50%) minutes, and the remaining spent his/her time in between 16 and 30 minutes (5%). It was identified that the participant who spent more time on Busuu was at the beginner level/A1. They also accessed the app more frequently than the students at the intermediate language proficiency level, as depicted in figure 4. Students at the beginner level showed more interest than students at the intermediate level. It means that the lower the level, the

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longer the time students access the app. Their spending more time on the app showed their motivation and will to learn the language. An interview was conducted to gain more information on the last-mentioned student. He stated:

Excerpt 1:

> "I am not good in English Miss. When I do the test, I only get A1. I like this app because I can get more vocabularies. The vocabulary part provides the spelling so I can remember the correct one. I usually study English using Busuu before my bed times when I feel relax. I access it quite long because it looks like a game."

2. Control over Cognitive Processing

This research then also tried to find out which feature the app provided is considered as the most and the least favorite one. This state of preference is essential in a way that students activate their metacognitive knowledge. After using the app for seven days, participants were asked to complete the questionnaires regarding the three features they liked and disliked. The result showed that vocabulary and grammar practices were the most favorite features, among others. Three-fourths of the participants selected the vocabulary practices as the most favorite one, followed by 70% of them who chose grammar practices. The reading practices magnetized only less than half of the participants (45%) followed by a lower-number on writing (20%) and listening (15%) practices. To sum up, vocabulary practices are the most favorite, and translation practice is the least one. The following figure described more detailed information related to the most and the least favorite features of the Busuu App.

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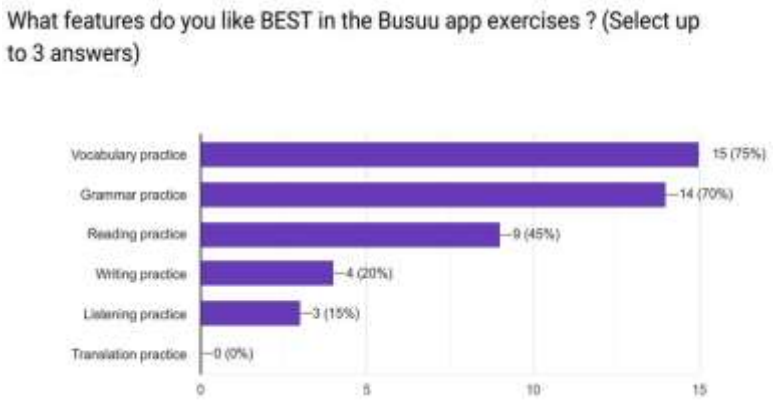

Figure 5. The most and least favorite features of the Busuu App

An interview with Dinda, a student at the intermediate level, described the reason for putting vocabulary enrichment as the most favorite feature in the Busuu app.

Excerpt 2

"I think I choose the vocabulary drill as my favorite one because the app provides both the word and its definition. It helps me memorize the word."

The other criteria which show students activate their cognitive processing is through self-reflection. The graph below illustrated that through the automated feedback, participants have reflected on the learning process. This reflection, as believed by many scientists, is a key to the psychological element of autonomy. Little (1997) claimed that researchers had described reflection as a critical psychological component of autonomy and, for Little (1997), conscious reflection on the learning process is a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning.

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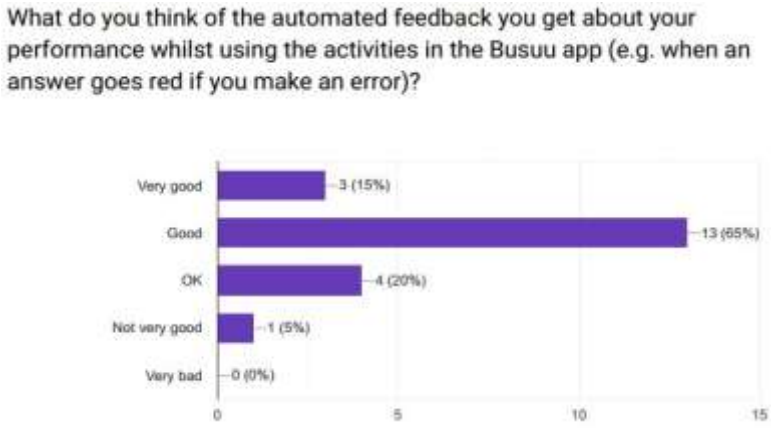

Figure 6. Students' perceptions of Automated Feedback Feature

The automated feedback that participants get from the app (which is limited to whether the answer is correct or not) was positively responded. Turning to the details, as the graph illustrates below, two-thirds of the participants considered the automated feedback 'good', and precisely a quarter of users rated it 'ok'. A small minority had a better response by claiming the feedback 'very good', and an insignificant proportion rated it negatively as 'not very good'. To sum up, a majority of respondents showed positive attitudes towards the automated feedback feature. Yet, suggestions were conveyed that the app should have not only stated the correct and incorrect answer, but it also should have provided the explanation.

3. Control over Learning Content

Once the participants downloaded the app, they expected that accessing it would improve their English proficiency level. Vocabulary enrichment, grammar, and listening are three skills most anticipated students the most to improve. The results showed that nearly all participants thought that the app had met their expectations, as depicted in

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figure 4. However, a small number of participants reported that they had no expectations.

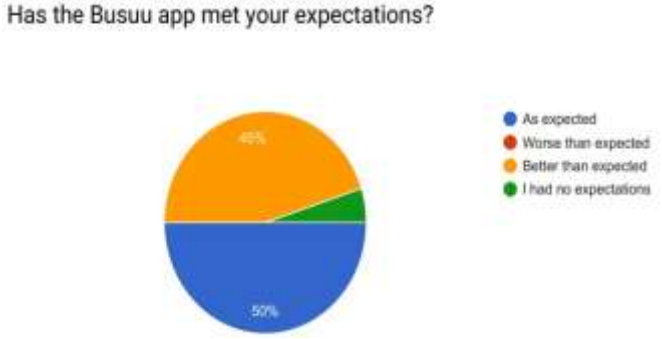

Figure 7. Users' expectation of Busuu

An interview conducted with one of the students, Gita, verified the research finding that the app met users/ expectations. Her English proficiency level was at Intermediate level (B1). She stated that:

Excerpt 3

"The app is cool Miss, seriously. It is not only because they give fun methods, but also harder than apps I have before. I give five stars. I enjoyed while I was using the app. However, I have to pay. And it's not cheap."

Her statements above revealed that she was delighted with the app. The app was beyond expectations.

In addition, to portrait how participants found the app beneficial, they were requested to the state to what extent they agreed with the statement 'using the busuu app has helped me improve my knowledge of the language I'm learning'. A vast majority (70%) strongly agreed, a fifth (20%) agreed, and a minority (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. It can be clearly observed that students had a positive attitude towards the app. See the figure below.

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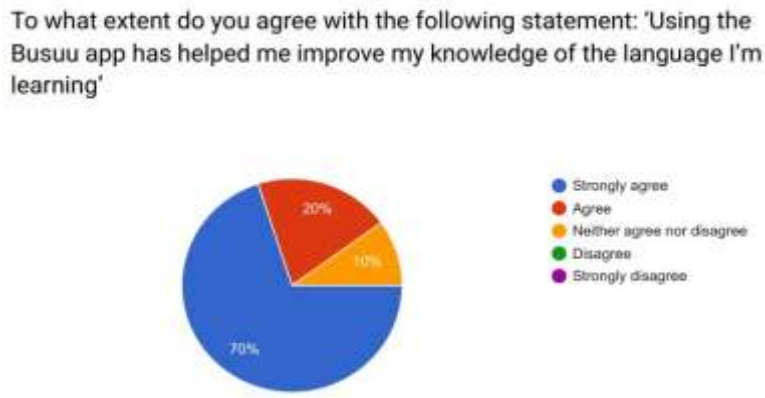

Figure 8: Busuu as a helpful language mobile application

The finding was also supported by one of the participants, Rafael, who described as follows. Excerpt 4:

"I think my vocabularies in English are limited. I hope this app will help me enrich my vocab. And after using it for seven days, I have learned a lot. I decided to learn vocabulary first after grammar and listening. What makes it easier to memorize is that the vocabularies are categorized based on the theme. This app truly answers my need."

The information above showed that the app helped him improve his knowledge of English. His choice of selecting vocabulary first than other skills described that he controlled over learning content.

Discussion

The research findings showed that many participants have already had sufficient English background knowledge before utilizing the app. Vesselinov (2016) stated that the Busuu app attracted and supported learners at the beginner level. However, this study focused on how the intermediate level students learned English as a foreign

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language autonomously. As interpreted in the finding, beginner level has the highest percentage in using Busuu because the features provided by Busuu are considered able to improve their English ability. Because they realize that their abilities are still at the beginner level, they need a lot of practice and features that can increase vocabulary and can provide convenience coupled with comfort, and that's all they find in the Busuu application. At the intermediate level, they have better English skills than students at the beginner level. So they rarely use Busuu. They only occasionally a week use one of the Busuu features that allow their English language skills to approach native speakers. Their spending more time on the app showed their motivation and will to learn the language. This finding was consistent with findings by (Kétyi, 2014), (Malerba, 2016) and (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018) that motivation would trigger students to study longer. Regarding autonomy, the findings also represented that students learned autonomously as they got motivated. This was in line with Little's theory in Benson (2017) that autonomous learning is related to language awareness, motivation, strategy use, learner beliefs, and metacognition.

Autonomous learning discusses students' control of learning content. Students control relates to their freedom to choose activities which agree with their, expectations, needs, and choice. Students suggested that the automated feedback in the app should have not only stated the correct and incorrect answer, but it also should have provided the explanation. This research finding illustrated that through the automated feedback, participants have reflected on the learning process. This reflection, as believed by many scientists, is a key to the psychological element of autonomy. Little (1997) claimed that researchers have described reflection as a critical psychological component of independence and, for Little (1997), conscious reflection on the learning process is a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning. Reflection directing to action is

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identified as a cognitive core for control over learning management, mostly if it is carried out collectively to transform. Vocabulary enrichment, grammar, and listening are three skills most students expected the most to improve.

The results showed that nearly all participants thought that the app had met their expectations, as depicted in figure 6. However, a small number of participants reported they had no expectations. Having further investigated, they were the ones who were at the upper intermediate language level. This is in line with the case found in Part A about the percentage of students who use Busuu, where students who are at the upper intermediate level also have fewer presentations in using Busuu compared to students who are at the level below. Students' expectations of Busuu will be directly proportional to the students' interest in using Busuu. This research finding corresponds with Benson's theory of the third aspect of autonomous learning, namely, controls over learning content. Students would be autonomous learners if they knew what they expected before understanding and managed how to accomplish it in their ways.

Regardless of which features students like and the number of Busuu usage presentations, most students still agree that the presence of Busuu as a learning support application brings many different benefits and circumstances. They learn a lot to determine class management to create the best learning for the students themselves. Convincingly, the students have positive attitudes and responses towards the employment of Busuu; the chose application as far as meeting the expectations and the objective of the research itself. Students respond well to the use of Busuu in the learning process, and they can even choose the programs they like most and do not enjoy. This proves that they have the right to learning to take control of the learning process that they live. Nearly all participants agreed that the app had supported them, enhancing their knowledge of the language they were learning. A small proportion of participants

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neither agreed nor disagreed. It means that they had positive attitudes towards the app. This finding was in line with the results from previous researches (Castañeda, 2016); (Khaddage, 2013); (Brown, 2012); (Vesselinov, 2016); (Kétyi, 2014).

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This article enhanced the language learning process through a mobile application by presenting a portrait study of autonomous app users, as promoted by Steel (2012). It employed an attractive method by obtaining the data collection from within the app. The research concerned some issues such as device preference used to access the app, varied age ranged in the same English proficiency level, the pattern of use, best and least favorite features, self-reflection of the learning process, and their thought of language learning through the app. The result and discussion have come to the conclusion that students have positive attitudes towards Busuu, the selected application in terms of meeting expectations. The app supports learners' autonomy. This paper is not without the limitation that the app used to study autonomously was restricted to the researcher's choice. The next research could work on the app, which had ever been used by the participants before conducting the investigation, focusing on the other field of studies. This study implied that the use of the app had supported language learning. Thus this app is suggested to be used in the class.

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