When I uploaded my first webpage onto the infamous Geocities back in 1997, I was probably the first child in my hometown to own a virtual space on the World Wide Web.
Despite being a language educator, I possess a strong interest in ICT, learning most of the programming and IT knowledge on my own with the help of readily-available resources online. When I uploaded my first webpage onto the infamous Geocities back in 1997, I was probably the first child in my hometown to own a virtual space on the World Wide Web. The sense of excitement was so profound that I began promoting it to my friends and family members just to get some feedback on it. But there was a problem. More than half of them did not have Internet access and they could not even imagine how my simple webpage looked like. Those who managed to access my webpage gave good comments, simply because it was done by a young kid and they did not even bother to offer advice for improvements.

Unsurprisingly, the same situation happened again when I first mooted the idea of developing a mobile application that could potentially change the way language learners learn vocabulary. The idea came to me while I was explaining the meaning of a word to my student through text messaging right before I went to sleep at about midnight. That eureka moment caused me to stay awake for at least a few more hours as I started drawing mind maps and flow charts on my notepad.

Falling back on my academia and
research experience, I initiated the LexiMinds’ journey in a structured manner. The next morning, I asked about 5 of my students to stay back after class and I conducted a focus group interview, which is one of the so-called “must-dos” in gathering user inputs particularly concerning usability. However, the session took less than 10 minutes not because my students did not give any feedback, but because I was overwhelmed with the countless comments given that I decided to end the interview.

In less than 10 minutes, I had a list of at least 60 user expectations on what they wanted or needed in a vocabulary learning app. More than half of the expectations were not even close to what I wanted to do, simply because the students were drawing their experiences from the existing apps that they had used. Some cited existing apps as the benchmark to which I needed to follow. It was at that moment, I remembered the famous quote from Steve Jobs, “It’s not the consumers’ job to know what they want”. True enough.

Users would not have known they can navigate easily using GPS or engage in group messaging until such things existed. And so, I stopped listening to users. But I observed what they regularly do. When they do not know a word, chances are they will either ask a friend or look for a visual representation of it. Hence, LexiMinds is created to fit this habit, making vocabulary learning more sociable and visualized.

In order to allow creative and innovative designing and development of application, we need to stop listening to the users and start sampling and scrutinize their experiences. Users do not really care how an app works, but once they find a way to use it, they are most likely to stick to it. So, as a designer or developer, we should not pay too much attention to the nasty complaints we get for our application, instead pay attention on how the users are using the application and then try to improve on it.

But most importantly, we need to set in our mind that the app is never really a final version. Constant fine-tuning is a must to create an app that enhances user experience and ultimately their satisfaction.

With the support of my team members, the initial versions of LexiMinds have been tested by a limited group of students and showcased in several exhibitions. The feedback was mind-blowing and it spurred us to do better, despite limited funding and resources. Although we are still tweaking the app before releasing it publicly, I am truly optimistic that it will generate students’ interests in learning vocabulary because LexiMinds actually creates a whole new vocabulary learning experience, and we would like all students to be part of this wonderful journey.