UTILIZING SMARTPHONES TO FACILITATE LEARNING POST-COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: A CASE STUDY WITH ARAB LEARNERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The language learning discipline is constantly evolving with new pedagogical methods being introduced and adopted everywhere. Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational sphere was grave, the educators throughout the world improvised and imparted knowledge through virtual teaching during the lockdown. Learning remotely and digitally for more than a year has habituated the learners to using technology for education. The present paper propounds ways in which this acquaintance can be capitalized by using smartphones in regular English language classrooms in Saudi universities post-COVID-19 lockdown. In addition, it includes the findings of a survey, outlining the perspectives of one hundred students towards the fastest-growing technologies in education.

Keywords: Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Smartphones, English learning.

1. Introduction

Constant efforts are being made to revolutionize the field of TESOL since the recognition of English language as lingua franca. Experts have been proposing and adopting contemporary pedagogies and tools to help language learners benefit more. The advancements in language learning have taken place in several divisions, such as language learning materials, teaching methodologies, learning strategies, teaching modes, and the like. Furthermore, a dedicated division known as CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) has gained wide popularity since early 2000s as it uses computers to aid the process of language learning. In recent times, the ubiquity of smartphones has shifted the focus from CALL to MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning). TESOL pundits are now finding ways to exploit the prevalent gadget in language classrooms.

In 2014, Pegrum encouraged the use of smartphones in language learning as he stated "mobile learning is becoming increasingly common, and mobile learning resources for supporting the teaching and learning of language are now widely available." He emphasised that "smartphones can be tools for language learning by which students get access and engage with materials at any place and any time." Similar stress has been laid on MALL by Boraie, who believes that "MALL is the way forward and is key to the next generation of English language teaching." According to her, "the coming generations of smart phones will enable us to develop a wide range of interactive content integrating a variety of media providing learners with the ability to interact with other learners."

In their paper titled "Mobile-Assisted Language Learning," published in 2012, Miangah and Nezarat considered MALL as "an ideal solution to language learning barriers in terms of time and place" (309). Several researchers have been successful in highlighting the positive prospects of using smartphones in Saudi

universities as well. Nalliveettil and Alenazi's 2016 study, for instance, suggested that Saudi students recognize mobile phones as an innovative language learning tool. According to them, "students are often frustrated with the traditional teaching methodologies, and it is time for English teachers to try and test mobile technology integrated activities to help students develop a positive attitude" (270). On the other hand, the findings of Habbash, published in 2015, hint that many teachers in the kingdom are unsure of the effectiveness of using mobile phones in classrooms as EFL teachers believe them to be "risky in classrooms" (454).

Among recent studies, Ta'amneh's research in early 2021 implied to "encourage students to use their smartphones purposefully to improve their English skills rather than the traditional educational techniques founded on conventional classrooms (7)." Similarly, the detailed study of Aljaber in the same year "found mobile applications to be a valuable resource in the learning process (184)."

It is noteworthy that all the above-mentioned findings were either made in the pre-COVID-19 period or during its peak. With classes returning to the regular mode throughout the kingdom, the present paper outlines some ways in which smartphones can be utilized in the English language classrooms of Saudi universities in the post-virtual learning era. Also, students' perspectives of learning through mobile phones are included in the study.

2. Method

A mixed-method approach, which included the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, was used in this research. The in-class performances and participation of the students belonging to the undergraduate courses at the Department of English, Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia were observed for one semester (from September 2021 to December 2021). During this period, various classroom activities were crafted in a way which encouraged the students to use smartphones for the learning process.

In addition, the perspectives of students towards the use of smartphones in classrooms were also recorded through a thirteen-item online questionnaire framed in an easily comprehensible language. The survey was conducted at the end of the semester through Google Forms with the respondents belonging to both—the male and the female colleges. The first three items were simple *Yes/No* questions which aimed to scrutinise the accessibility of smartphones and internet connection. The following ten statements aimed to investigate the efficacy of smartphones in the process of language learning and were followed by a five-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. A total of one hundred students belonging to the English department participated in the survey.

3. Discussion

Using smartphones in classroom activities produced some striking observations. Unlike in the pre-COVID-19 classes, smartphones in English classrooms post-lockdown majorly favoured the learning process, for the students were deeply accustomed to using technology for learning during the lockdown. Several ways in which the researcher exploited his students' electronic devices in the English classes are outlined below along with the observations.

3.1 Screen-sharing:

Present-day Saudi students are digital natives, and they carry smartphones into their colleges. Most of these students have access to internet as they remain subscribed to internet plans round the year. Keeping this in mind, the researcher taught his students unconventionally by replacing the whiteboard with mobile screens. The teacher's screen could not be displayed using over-head projectors due to its unavailability in the classrooms. Nevertheless, the screen was shared with all the students through video-conferencing application

called Zoom. No problem was faced by students in managing the application as it was extensively used during the remote-learning period. Moreover, internet through hotspot was provided to the students who did not have their own internet access so as to ensure total participation.

The screen-sharing facilitated the learning process in many ways. To start with, it helped in making the classes more inclusive as no student was left idle. Broadcasting the target pages also combatted the challenges of 'coursebook not brought' and 'coursebook not available.' Furthermore, the highlighting option enabled the teacher to foreground the focal points on the screen itself, thereby letting the whiteboard available for judicious use. It also proved to be time-saving as prepared notes were spontaneously displayed and students took screenshots whenever required.

3.2 Interactive Quizzes

Numerous mobile applications can be used in classrooms to stimulate the interest and motivation of students. Kahoot, Quizlet, Microsoft Forms, Google Forms are some of these applications which have been successful in revitalizing the classes, particularly the in-class quizzes and tasks. Kahoot, a game-based learning platform, is an efficient way of engaging every student in the classroom. It has helped teachers in making the quizzes enjoyable as they host live games with questions displayed on a big screen while students answer on their devices. Similarly, Google Forms has been used to conduct quick and short quizzes during the class to monitor the progress of the students. Feedback in each question, which the students receive after the submission of the form, has aided in reinforcing the learning. It has been observed that students have welcomed such innovative tasks in classrooms as they blend technology and learning, unlike the traditional pen and paper quizzes. In addition, digital quizzes have saved time and effort of paper distribution, collection, and correction.

3.3 Supplementary Applications

Throughout the semester, students were free to use their phones in the classrooms to access information related to the language item in focus or the lesson being taught. It was observed that students self-clarified several doubts without impeding the rapport of the class. The mobile applications which supplemented in their understanding were mostly the dictionary apps and Google Translation. Google Images served as a visual dictionary for them as most students searched on the internet for the vocabulary items which they could not comprehend.

3.4 Language Skills

The use of smartphones abets all English language classes, particularly the skills lessons. The students develop real-life language use when tasks are designed around smartphones. For instance, students practice actual writing when they are given a task to write online, such as drafting a social media post or commenting under a friend's post. Writing emails and responding to them during the class is also an interesting activity which develops students' creativity and speed. In her article, Beare points out a similar example, "…student might write a product inquiry with another student replying to the inquiry with a follow-up email. This is nothing new. However, just using their smartphones can help motivate the students to complete the task." Writing on smartphones ease the writing process also because the predictive text and autocorrection features assist the learners in enhancing their write-ups.

Likewise, the plethora of reading material available on the internet can benefit in honing the reading skills of the students. The long screens of smartphones enable the learners to read authentic texts directly from the internet. Moreover, options like zooming, highlighting, copying, and translating encourage self-learning among the students. In the same way, listening lessons are optimized if the tasks require students to use

smartphones along with the earphones. This ensures uninterrupted listening practice with volume and play/ pause controls with the students. A YouTube link shared with everyone in the class is sufficient for the listening input and to make such activity efficient.

3.5 Amplified Accessibility

The smartphones in the classrooms augment the accessibility of some vital teaching-learning elements. One of the key takeaways from the virtual-teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown was the organization of the course-notes. While teaching remotely, several teachers uploaded and maintained the course-notes online, thereby making them "more manageable and accessible than the handwritten notes" (Siddiqui 224). Since the students were deeply accustomed to accessing the course-notes virtually, they preferred digital notes over paper-based notes in the post-lockdown classes as well. This smoothed out the classroom operations in various manners. To list some, it made the learning process more focussed as the students paid attention to the lesson and tasks rather than preparing notes in their notebooks. Also, it proved to be time-saving as the teacher did not spend additional time in transcribing the notes on the board and utilized it in more constructive activities. Furthermore, it made the classes coherent as the students could at any time refer to the notes of the previous chapter without worrying about the hassles of bringing all the course-notes to each class.

Another desirable attribute that was gained from the teaching during the lockdown was easy communication between teachers and students. User-friendly mobile applications like MyU and Moodle helped in establishing a connection between teachers and students as the students were able to reach out to their teachers through a semi-formal interface when face-to-face communication was impossible. The use of such messaging apps was encouraged even after the resumption of regular classes, and it impacted the learning process positively. Students were able to clarify their doubts remotely as the teacher responded to each student's query whenever possible. Sometimes, even in classrooms, students used their smartphones to refer to the chats in which their queries were answered.

4. Survey and Results

A survey was conducted to validate the observations discussed above and to identify the students' perspectives. The questionnaire was divided into two sections—one surveyed the mobile accessibility with three simple fact-based questions and the other comprised the ten opinion-based statements. The first section exhibited that ninety-nine percent of the participants own a smartphone, eighty percent have a working internet plan on their smartphones, and ninety-seven percent bring their smartphones to their colleges. These responses are encouraging for the present study as the prolific presence of smartphones in the classrooms can welcome innovative language pedagogies.

The responses in the second section were uplifting as well and are listed in Table 1 followed by the analysis:

Table 1: The ten statements of the questionnaire and the number of responses received in each point.

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	I can read English text easily from my smartphone.	49	40	9	0	2
2	I can type English text easily on my smartphone.	49	29	20	0	2
3	I understand English audio (like in movies) better when I listen to them through earphones.	40	34	17	8	1
4	Apps like Google Translation help me in learning English.	49	23	23	3	2
5	Google Dictionary and other dictionary apps help me in learning English.	43	26	22	8	1
6	Apps like MyU help me in communicating with my teachers easily.	69	23	7	0	1
7	I find digital course-notes (like on Moodle) very useful and handy.	39	30	26	3	2
8	Using technology in classrooms makes me more motivated towards learning.	47	28	21	2	2
9	I enjoy when learning is done through games and tasks.	48	29	20	2	1
10	I'd love to have learning through smartphones.	51	23	19	4	3

As can be seen in the table, eighty-nine percent of the respondents agree to being comfortable in reading texts from their smartphones. This is a boon for language teachers as they can conduct reading classes smoothly even in the absence of coursebooks and reading handouts. Likewise, smartphones can also be exploited for writing activities in the classrooms as ninety-eight percent of the respondents do not find it challenging to type English text on their phones. The researcher believes that encouraging students to write digitally will also improve their typing speed and will familiarize them with handy present-time features like predictive text and autocorrection. Almost three fourths of the respondents admitted to understanding English audio more effectually when they listen to it through earphones. Such responses are favourable for teachers as they can use any audio available on the internet for listening activities.

A similar drift was observed when the students were asked how different mobile applications benefit them. The responses suggest that most participants have faith in using translation and dictionary apps for language learning. Promoting the use of such applications in the classrooms can be obliging for teachers as they develop autonomy among language learners. It is noteworthy that the virtual correspondence between teachers and students through semi-formal messaging apps like MyU received the maximum support from the students as almost seventy percent of the respondents strongly agreed to having a convenient communication with their teachers using the respective application. Regarding digital course-notes, while most students find them useful, twenty percent are still unsure of their usefulness. It is believed that this number will decrease as the emphasis on digitalization of course-notes will elevate.

The responses to the last three statements of the questionnaire are also approving for the study. When the participants were asked if technology-oriented classes motivate them towards learning, three fourths of them responded positively. Such unidirectional responses were also received in the penultimate statement, which investigated their inclination towards game-based and task-based learning. Keeping this mind, teachers can boost the learning in classrooms by devising language tasks which use smartphones as tools. Finally, the preferences of the respondents in the last statement reveal that more than seventy percent of the students are

willing to use smartphones for learning. This is invigorating for teachers as the high interest of the students can allow them to experiment and innovate in their language classrooms.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Enabling the use of smartphones in classrooms faced certain challenges for the teacher and the learning process. For instance, around five percent of the students in every class were easily distracted as they switched to mobile applications unconnected with the classroom activity from time to time. Also, some students confronted issues related with the internet connection or device's low battery percentage. Although the hotspot facility resolved the internet shortage, students with discharged smartphones remained unoccupied in some classes. Additionally, reading and typing English text on their smartphones daunted some students as they hardly use their gadgets in a language other than Arabic.

Teachers can adopt certain measures to overcome these limitations so that they do not hamper in achieving the objectives of the classes. The issue of distracted students will subside when a close and regular monitoring throughout the classroom is done by the teacher. In the same way, regular reminders to bring sufficiently charged smartphones and their accessories, like earphones and power banks, will lower the percentage of inactive participants. Lastly, it is recommended to encourage practice among students who are sluggish in typing and reading English using smartphones. This will develop their pace of using the target language at the most widely used platform: smartphones.

6. Conclusion

Several studies were conducted in the previous decade to identify the role of mobile phones in language classes. While the early researches listed numerous challenges which language learning through mobile phones poses, the recent articles have predominantly shown that smartphones can be a boon for language classes due to their "salient features such as convenience, portability, productivity, connectivity, affordability, interaction, and accessibility to up-to-date materials and media options" (Alzieni 93). The present study has been successful in proving that the university students of English language in Saudi Arabia, a prosperous nation with widespread presence of technology and internet, have benefitted from the use of gadgets in their classrooms; and hence, they welcome the innovation. Since the students were deeply accustomed to using technology for learning in the lockdown era, it is believed that the utilization of smartphones in the regular classes post-lockdown will be less challenging and more facilitating for language learners.

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