Smartphones in ESL Classes – Easier Communication and Poor Retention in a Post-Covid Language Learning Scenario

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Abstract

The present research study concerns the use of smartphones in language learning classrooms in a public university in Saudi Arabia. Current academic research have already directed our attention phones in ESL classrooms and various advantages of smartphones. After the pandemic, smartphones and computers are necessary gadgets for online learning. ESL/EFL teachers are advised to use different strategies to make learning enjoyable. However, the assessment part is far away from accurate in measuring student learning. At the end of the semester, very minor improvement has been noticed among the students. This study is a conscious observation of student behavior in language learning in a class of forty students. It is found that the use of smartphones in language learning classroom did not show significant improvement in students' language acquisition process but increased one's search skills on internet.

Keywords: *mobile learning, smartphones, Technology in classrooms, learner style, online teaching, Covid 19, pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

"Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach" (Marc Prensky, 2001). 20 years later from what Prensky had seen then, we as teachers are now brought face to face with the reality that technology is an essential means to achieve learning. We use blackboards, whiteboards, projectors and notebooks for teaching and learning. Even with technological advancements,

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though mobile phones have become affordable and internet cheaper we do not have smart classrooms. The pandemic has made the use of technology mandatory and as a result, smartphones have become an integral part of our life as it offers a lot of faster and cheaper solutions. However, there is no strong evidence that smartphones have enabled language learning easier, better and faster.

Speed of internet and choice of study materials or place and pace are components of freedom and if classroom environment is to be managed, perhaps technology in the form of computers and smartphones with internet has been a very good tool. Mobile phones have evolved from "slow and bulky devices to smaller, sophisticated and ubiquitous smartphones" (Brown and Mbati). 2015). Contemporary mobile technologies now include "complex and sophisticated systems, software and applications" (Brown and Mbati, 2015) to enable various LMS to work and therefore enabling distance teaching and learning in such pandemic times. But the greatest challenge was "coping with the current overflow of available information." Learning online means a lot of navigation so there is a need for training on how to source and "navigate in the ocean of available information and knowledge" (Brown, 2007) as learners should acquire navigating skills for completing the tasks on time. "Learning is seen as a self-structured and self-motivated process of knowledge construction and the learner is regarded as a self-governed creator of knowledge" (Ruschoff, 2002). In this paper I am going to present my observations in the use of smartphones in ESL classrooms. This study is about the efficacy of smartphones in language courses in an academic setting.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

21st century is an age for learning, information and communication due to the revolution of mobile technology. "The practice of providing education with the help of modern technologies is termed as e-education or e-learning or m-learning (Kumar & Rajan, 2014). During this pandemic, it became obvious that not all students were digitally competent. Earlier a majority used smartphones only for calls, selfies and chat. Now the classroom has shifted to online mode. In Saudi Arabia, we use the LMS, Blackboard, which has many features such as whiteboard, sharing files and videos. But one can share material only in certain formats such as of jpeg, pdf and ppt. However, students could not follow the lecture and exercises without a text at hand. A majority of the students logged in through a hand-held device such as a smartphone. In online classes, speed of internet, space and size are important factors in the experience of a learner. When I shared the e-book, many students could not view the screen, some could not hear the sound properly. Many could not respond through mic, because the devices were not equipped for online classes. They got logged off

from the internet.

It was a unique experience for both the teacher and students as the teacher spoke while the students responded through chat. Due to rain, power cut, fire, low-life battery and data-pack costs, students could not attend classes smoothly. Many of them banked on recordings and for some reasons in certain areas students did not get network and could not log into Blackboard. So, they requested for links to recordings. The complexity and vulnerability of this learning environment brought to surface the problems and diversity of the learners as well as their unique learning styles and the multitude of devices that can be brought to bear on the learning environment suggest that contemporary classrooms are a delicate ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Like Mark Prensky, I have realized in my decade long teaching experience that teaching and learning are not the same, and students do not necessarily learn what we teach. So "educators need to try new things, experiment, and invent, and in the process generate engagement and form a partnership with their students." Patricia Kahn and Edward Chapel mention in their essay "Use of Mobile Technology at Montclair State University" that 21st century learner differs a lot from the previous generations as they are exposed to various modern technologies from the very beginning. Carolina González Ramírez in her paper titled, "English for Specific Purposes: Brief History and Definitions", points out that during the 1980s, the learner-centered approach gathered strength and in order to respond to this trend instructors started developing materials to suit learner needs.

In "The Framework for the Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME)" Koole describes 'mobile learning' as a process resulting from mobile technologies' convergence with human capacities of learning and social interaction. This model takes into consideration the technical characteristics of mobile devices as well as social and personal aspects of learning (Koole, 2009). In this FRAME model of learning, students can use different physical and virtual situations, to interact with others. Learning experiences take place in an information context where interaction is mediated through technology. Further, Kahn and Chapel add that mobile learning provides collaboration among learners and improved access to information as Collaboration can reduce search time and improve efforts to evaluate information.

In the words of Dunn (2006), instructors "need to become aware of the variety of ways in which individual learners process new and difficult information". The 21st century children are used to "clicking the links and they leap around virtually" (Prensky, 2001).

These days a typical college student has grown up with computers, and the Internet has become an essential part in their everyday lives (Jones, 2002). A decade ago, students who attended traditional lectures and researched material in the library, has been replaced by the computer savvy learner. But not all students are computer savvy as Dunn and Searson (2001), present how students have different styles of learning: "auditory learners prefer to learn by listening and discussing, visual learners by seeing and reading, tactile learners by manipulating objects with their hands and writing, and kinesthetic learners by doing and moving".

"Cell phone technology is ubiquitous among today's learner and is a tool that is easy to use, inexpensive, and can provide content in a variety of formats," Jones, S. (2002). Students were competent in sharing pictures, files, recording lectures, using translation software and updated through whatsapp their whereabouts like an appointment with the dentists or waiting for the doctor in hospitals. Social distancing and isolation brought by coronavirus pandemic, required the teachers to give detailed and repeated online instructions. So there was the need for the "faculty to acquire skills" to guide the students in school-related learning (Azlan et.al, 2020). After submission of their late assignments - copied easily from the internet, and translated in seconds through google software - they expected a prompt response. As a result of their experiences Prensky comments, "Digital Natives crave interactivity - an immediate response to their each and every action" (Prensky, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted was qualitative research method - through analysis of secondary sources and classroom observation. The students were directly observed through their interactions on whatsapp, LMS chat and voice facility, assignments, homework, and quizzes. I advised the students to use smartphones to find meanings of words and use English to communicate on whatsapp. When students were told that their questions will go unanswered if they don't use English in class, they started using the google translate. The students are at Level one, and that tells us that they are freshers and belong to Preparatory year where they learn the fours skills such as Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. At level 1, they learn to make wh questions and respond to wh- questions, read for details, describe a person, or things using adjectives and also short paragraphs on general topics like house, family and introducing themselves.

OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS

Today's college student is a different person. They are technologically savvy but not always competent with using the tools and universities need to take this into consideration. If students are trained to use suitable mobile applications properly, they can be academically engaged for better academic performance. It has been observed that during class hours, the attention and interaction is strong among motivated students who want high scores. But weaker students, being inadequately prepared are hardly found responding through chat facility and delayed with their submission of assignments. The tech-savvy students used their internet for a quick look for meanings and translations and they did not type to do the search. They held the device over the text, used the selection tool and allowed the material to be scanned and interpreted but they did not store that information for further use.

Majority of the students in ESL classrooms did not have the vocabulary to search and find the right material. In absence of prior knowledge, they got easily distracted with social media messages. In a language learning classroom, L2 learners start with the assumption that L2 forms are quite equal to those of their L1s and look for the mopholexical similarity between them in meanings or functions (Albaqami (2020) and that let to pronunciation and structural problems in the production of the sentences. As the students needed all instructions to be interpreted in Arabic which led to a lot of unnecessary talk among students and took away the teaching time on Blackboard chat.

MOBILE PHONES AND LEARNING

Mobile phones are largely used in making calls. Students who are married and travel from distant places cannot afford to switch off mobile phones lest they fail to communicate during an emergency. In my research I have found that students did not use mobile phones even for learning vocabulary because they did not have regular internet in their phones as internet costs quite a lot and searching learning material is time consuming and eats up a quite a lot of data. So, the cost of internet plays a significant role in using mobile phones for learning purpose.

The weak students did a quick search on the internet, located the required content, copied it and pasted it on the screen and clicked the send button. This becomes plagiarized work and it isn't easy to edit a work on mobile phones. But the students are not equipped to edit a translated work as they do not have the basic vocabulary to communicate or write a sentence or a paragraph. Most of them used translation softwares which changed the meanings from what they originally intended. In face-to-face communication they could not

make sentences. They answered in short, yes or or. In a language learning classroom, L2 learners start with the assumption that L2 forms are quite equal to those of their L1s and look for the mopholexical similarity between them in meanings or functions (Albaqami (2020) and that let to pronunciation and structural problems in the production of the sentences.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Many researchers have found that Facebook offers informal language learning and students often practice English by writing updates or chatting online. Nowadays the smartphones are faster and come with more storage space to make learning easier. Alharthi et.al (2020) also found that Social Media Platforms, SMPs, improve learner engagement and vocabulary development to facilitate learning. Whatsapp is also a very good means of communication both for synchronous and asynchronous communication. According to Alaslani & Alandejani, (2020) SNSs can be used as learning applications to help students cooperate and engage. The duo found that the most commonly preferred site for participants for studying and activities related to education was WhatsApp 67.90%, YouTube 16.76%, Facebook, 11.93%, Twitter received 2.27% and Snapchat received 1.14% (Alaslani & Alandejani, 2020).

Figueira & Luciana (2017 found that these SMP tools serve as "complements" to the "traditional LMS" as the students maintain that they are "fundamental for the accomplishment of their learning goals." In a class of 42 students in Biology Department, we found the top 10 students could understand instructions in English. In a survey in English without translation, out of 42, only 18 students responded. Out of which only 12 students said they learnt English by watching films.

THE PROBLEM OF SMALL SCREEN AND A LOT OF NAVIGATION

The size of smartphone is also an impediment in learning and one cannot read on smartphones on a regular basis, rather it should be used only for a quick reference. Reading messages on whatsapp is possible but lengthy materials require a bigger screen. There are other cultural factors which does not encourage mobile learning much. Using a mobile phone after online classes can be a disturbing factor among family members. Mobile phones are good for quick reference, but when the material requires in-depth reading, space and size was a constraint. Students find it strenuous to scroll and locate content and then read the material in its electronic form for a longer time. Navigating from one link to the other is painful on small screens and in many cases, certain links remain unavailable on mobile phones. As

mobile phones provide content in small portion suitable for viewing within its screen limits, it also tests a student's patience as it requires a lot of scrolling if it's a lengthy article and makes going forward and backward difficult.

ASSESSMENTS AND SELF-ASSESSMENTS AS A PART OF LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

The learning learning outcome did not happen as expected because students did not practice what was taught in class. As a result, many students were unable to answer even wh-questions in Speaking test. Karpicke and Roediger III (2006) suggest that frequent testing is a powerful assessment tool. They also believe "that testing (or continuous assignments that function as tests)" makes students study "more in preparation for the tests" and that "tests serve as a motivator to keep up with course assignments" but in reality constant pressure may lead to student burn out and lead to surface learning that is studying only for tests but not retain the information after the examinations are over. There are innumerable ways of self-assessments today through quiz, assignments, answering questions, questionnaire, survey, flashcards, games, rubrics-based assessment, checklist, etc. and the learner has to be genuinely interested in authentic self-assessment (Makwana, 2019).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Technology has definitely become an essential part of the 21st century learning environment, and as technology develops and becomes more sophisticated, the pedagogy providing the framework is modified to engage students in successful learning. Mobile phones and internet work in unison to feed the learners with the information the way they wanted it and when they wanted it. In this study it was obvious that if the information suited the learner interests, it was consciously stored and reused through browser 'favorites', otherwise the learner did not use that application. The level of technological comfort and knowledge of the user play a major in benefitting from mobile learning. Mobile phones help in impromptu translation, but the translation was mostly incorrect.

We also found that a positive learning experience did not depend on the type of technology; rather, a positive learning experience confirmed the methodologies and tools integrated into the learning environment. Despite the integration of pedagogical applications that support mobile technology, the onus lies on the students to use it to maximize their learning potential. However, all is not bad with mobile learning. Mobile phones enable students to learn and construct knowledge together.

As language acquisition is such a mysterious process on how people process meanings and perhaps that will tell us how to help students choose the right tool. Projectors are of great help in completing the course and managing classroom discipline. Though students took notes (this was a rare incidence) either on text books or recorded on phones and as they are not really tech savvy, they failed to store information for later use. They started using google translate but they did not memorize the info. In the speaking exam. they either read out from their chits or screen but could not recite anything to prove that they have learnt something in the course across nine units which were thought to be suitable for them. Some even resorted to their L1 during the examination and used vocabulary from their mother tongue. This shows they understood but lacked practice in expressing their ideas.

CONCLUSION

The students took the advantage of internet and prepared themselves on the spot. Without mobile phones they could not perform well in the following paper test which proved that they could not retain the information they collected from internet. The students prepared their notes in Arabic and put it on google translation and uploaded on the LMS so they could not answer simple questions required in real life situations. Though, the top five students maintained high scores, majority of the students could use the translation to interact with the teacher, find answers to critical questions, yet they depended on the teacher for explaining every part of the book.

Their dependence on the teacher has been confirmed by the findings in the research by Rao & Ramamuruthy (2015). Towards the end of the course after the completion of the course book and work book, students wanted the teacher to summarize the lessons contrary to Chatta & Haque's research study (2020) which found that in a technology driven class with flipped classroom instruction, "learners become autonomous and employ their learning styles in acquiring knowledge" and "become more active and learn with enthusiasm." The findings of Azlan et.al's research re-established the importance of guided activities as intervention to facilitate students' learning" which needs "curricular modernization and faculty development in the instructional use of technology" and as a result, new methods come up. This shift from teacher centered learning to student centred learning happens through the use of the social media sites (Al-Jabri & Eid, 2016). In the newly developed self-directed learning (SDL) framework, learners are responsible for monitoring and evaluating their own learning.

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