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## **The Role of Smartphones in Learning English Language Skills: A Study of University Students' Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated students' perspectives about the role of smartphones in learning English language skills. It discussed the benefits and difficulties of using smartphones in the process of learning. The sample consisted of one hundred and fifty one students enrolled in the first semester of the academic year 2019/2020 in different English courses taught at Taibah University. The researcher designed a questionnaire depending on previous studies investigated the role of smartphones in the process of teaching and learning. The participants were asked to decide at which level they agreed with each statement. The researcher analyzed data through Statistical Package for Social Sciences by applying mean scores and standard deviations. The results according to the students' answers were positive with a moderate usage of their smartphones in their attempt to learn English. Moreover, the results showed that there were no difficulties faced students during the process of learning through smartphones.

**Keywords:** Smartphone, Smartphone learning, English learning, Language learning, Learning.

### **1. Introduction**

Technology is important in learning and teaching nowadays. It plays important roles in shaping and transforming the way people communicate, learn, teach, and socialize with others. Technological tools make the world as a small village and helps people as well as learners to give and receive data all over the world without depending on the traditional ways used in the past. One new technological tool that learners may use in their learning is smartphone. Smartphones become one of the instruments that may be used in education since most of the students use them in their daily life. Using smartphones in learning and exchanging ideas through the World Wide Web is a new trend in twenty-one century. This trend enables educators to learn and obtain what they want through innovative ways. Young learners are enthusiastic toward using their mobiles in everyday events since most of them have new and up to date smartphones. They use them to make calls, play games, buying and selling things, and chatting with others through social media applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snap chat. They think that mobile technologies like many other technological tools have a lot of advantages that make them up to date with hot topics all over the world. One of the advantages of smartphones for learners is to use them in learning foreign languages. Studies point out that using technology may improve the process of teaching and learning English (Kessler, 2007; Machmud, 2017). Foreign language learning is a continuous leaning process that needs some equipments to make it easy and successful."Integrating some technological devices may motivate students as well as teachers to do their traditional jobs in different and attractive ways"( Ta'amneh, 2017: 143).Using smartphones and their applications in learning may help students and teachers to develop and improve procedures needed for learning and teaching, give helpful ideas that encourage students to study and learn better (Cui and Wang , 2008; Kizito, 2012; Wang ,2017). They can use them in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Besides, they can share information with their peers and others all over the world without looking for traditional ways to check their learning.

### **2. Literature Review**

Using a smartphone in learning English provided learners with new opportunities and various techniques of learning; including the relationship between instructors , students and learning items (Babiker ,2015).

The use of smartphones in learning motivated learners and supported their own learning process (Alqahtani and Mohammad, 2015; Tal and Gross, 2014). Integrating technology in learning created new learning strategies and supported students' achievements (Babiker, 2015; Thinley, Reye and Geva, 2014; Ebrahim, Ezzadeen and A.K, 2015). English language skills " can be learned more effectively using technological tools ." (Ta'amneh, 2014, p:188). Smartphone technology played important roles in facilitating the process of English learning. Students might face some educational problems or difficulties while learning a foreign language. Using smartphones in learning English provided opportunities for teachers and students to enhance learning and change the ways of learning (West, 2012). The characteristics of smartphone learning, which depended on collaboration with peers and instructors inside and outside the classroom, made this kind of learning efficient and well-organized (Gangaiamaran and Pasupathi, 2017; Klimova, 2019). The following is a number of studies investigating the role of smartphones in learning English language skills.

Al Aamri (2011) examined the effectiveness of using mobile phones in English learning. One hundred male and female students from different academic colleges at Sultan Qaboos University participated in this study. The researcher concentrated on the students' behavior, attitudes and problems in using their mobiles in learning English. Results showed that students prefer using their smartphones in the classroom but they were not given permissions by teachers to use them. The results also revealed that mobile phones were considered as good learning tool if the students used them appropriately. The researcher, at the end of the study, advised educationists, practitioners, teachers and decision makers to look positively at this kind of learning.

Abbasi and Hashemi (2013) examined the effect of using cell phones on the learners' vocabulary retention and the role of gender in vocabulary retention when using mobiles. Results showed that vocabulary retention was affected by using mobiles. It also revealed that the participants' vocabulary retention was not affected by gender.

In the same vein, Kanchana and Saha (2015) explored the role of smartphones in learning English in India. They found that integrating mobile phones in learning and teaching made teaching more successful. They advised EFL instructors to change their styles and techniques in teaching a foreign language depending on internet connectivity and educational applications in smartphones. Besides, the researchers asserted that using smartphones made learners eager to learn as independent learners.

Leis and Tohei (2015) investigated the merits of using smartphones in an English classroom. The participants were divided into two groups. The first one was prohibited from using their mobiles in the classroom while the second was supported to utilize them for learning purposes. Results revealed that the second group had a desire to learn more outside the classroom and were more independent learners than those who were prohibited from using smartphones inside classroom. The researcher advised instructors to encourage students to use their smartphones inside the classroom while learning English language.

In their study, Nalliveetil and Alenazi (2016) investigated students' perceptions about using mobile phones in learning English language at Aljof University. The participants were consisted of Fifty-two undergraduate EFL students. A self-report and questionnaire were used to know the participants' perspectives about the role of this kind of learning. Findings suggested instructors and practitioners to introduce new techniques and imaginative materials for the English class. They also found that teachers were positive and students were supportive towards using their smartphones in learning English language.

Using a sample of Najran University students, Elfeky and Masadeh (2016) examined the effect of mobile learning on the progress of the educational success and conversational skills. The researchers divided the participants into control and experimental groups. Fifty students were participated in this study. Results showed that the achievements and skills of the participants were affected positively as a result of using their mobiles in English learning. Depending on the results, the researchers suggested using the mobile phones inside classrooms.

Basal, Tanriverdi and Sari (2016) explored the effectiveness of mobile applications in teaching vocabulary. They examined the efficiency of a mobile apps on teaching forty figurative idioms compared to traditional ways for four weeks. They used pretest and posttest to discover the differences between the two group.

The results indicated that the experimental group achieved better in their learning than the control group. In addition, the researchers recommended using smartphones and their applications in the process of vocabulary teaching.

Similarly, Alkhezzi and Al-Dousary (2016) conducted a study to explore the role of using mobile phones and their applications on the process of teaching and learning English in an ESP context. Results revealed that using mobile phone applications affected students' comprehension of vocabulary and grammar. They also indicated that teaching and learning vocabulary could be done outside the classroom through using mobile phones in many different ways. Whereas teaching grammatical rules and writing skills needed certain plans because of certain limitations.

Ababneh (2017) conducted a study to explore students' perspectives about using their mobiles in English learning. The researcher aimed to know the importance of utilizing cell phones in learning English and the effect of academic major and gender on students' perspectives towards using their phones in the process learning. 101 students responded to the a questionnaire. Results showed a high usage of mobile phones in their learning. It also revealed that the participants had a positive feelings while using their mobiles in English learning. The students' gender and academic major had no significant effect on participants' attitudes towards utilizing mobiles in their learning.

Al Fawareh and Jusoh (2017) did a study to discover the effects of smartphones on academic staffs at Northern Border University. They did a survey study using questionnaires distributed to sixty six academic staffs having a smartphone. Results showed that the smartphone had used instead of a computer. The academic staffs used smartphones for knowledge sharing, teaching, and learning through social media applications. The results also revealed that smartphones had negative effects on the academic staff. They had the feelings of uncomfortably when smartphones were not with them.

Machmud and Abdulah (2017) investigated the effects of using smartphones in teaching and learning English. Sixty-three students were participated in this study. The researchers categorized students into two groups depending on a questionnaire of foreign language anxiety classroom scale. The results showed that both groups of students (high and low anxiety groups) used smartphones got higher score comparing with their scores while using traditional model of teaching. The study concluded that using smartphone integrated model of teaching reduces the their anxiety in learning speaking skill.

Farrah and Abu-Dawood (2018) investigated the usage of mobile phone applications in educational processes to identify the advantages, disadvantages, and difficulties of using smartphones. They used a questionnaire to know the general students' perspectives about the effects of using mobiles inside the classroom. Besides, they used interviews to show the participants' attitudes towards the troubles and the explanations. Results revealed that the majority of students responded positively to utilize mobile phone applications in their learning. Additionally, the results showed that learners study better through using their mobiles and mobile phone applications.

Ozer and Kılıc (2018) investigated the effects of mobile learning environment on educational achievement, acceptance of mobile learning devices and cognitive load of learners. The researchers used data in this study to recognize the effects of mobile learning. Seventy-one students were participated in this study. Results showed that the experimental group was better than the control group in academic achievements. The study also revealed that the students in the control group were cognitively overloaded comparing with students in the experimental group. Depending on the qualitative data, The themes pointed to the good and bad sides of the mobile-assisted learning environment.

### **3. Significance of the Study**

EFL teachers face many problems while teaching English language skills to the students from different departments. Students do not have enough information about English learning to deal with university subjects, so they sometimes look for new strategies and techniques to learn English language skills effectively. This study explores the role of using smartphones in learning English language skills among university

students. It is hoped that the results will help teachers and researchers while using smartphones at universities. The researcher also hopes that these results may help EFL instructors to modify their traditional strategies and techniques which may, in turn, improve their teaching practices and their students' performance in learning English language skills and consequently developing and improving students' growth in EFL learning.

#### 4. Questions of the Study

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the students' perspectives about the role of smartphones in learning English language skills ?
2. What are the difficulties of using smartphones in learning English language skills regarding students' opinions?

#### 5. Methodology

##### 5.1. Sample of the Study

The participants of the study were chosen purposefully from the students enrolled in the first semester of the academic year 2019/2020 in different English courses taught at Taibah University\Badr Branch in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The sample consisted of 151 students who taught different English courses during the semester.

##### 5.2. Instrument of the Study

The researcher designed a five-point Likert-type questionnaire depending on studies conducted to discover the role of smartphones in the process of teaching and learning. It consisted of thirty statements that the participants were asked to decide at which level they agreed with each statement. It was used to explore the role of smartphones in learning English from the perspectives of the students at Taibah University.

##### 5.3. Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Six experts were asked to look at the questionnaire and give their suggestions. The researcher selected ten students, answered the questionnaire twice with a two-week interval between them. The reliability coefficient was calculated using Cronbach Alpha. The calculated value was .85 which is enough to conduct this study.

#### 6. Data Collection

This study was conducted at Taibah University\Badr Branch in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the end of the first semester of the academic years 2019/2020. The researcher obtained a permission of the participants to conduct this study. A thirty item questionnaire was used to explore the students' opinions about the role of smartphones in learning English language. The researcher explained the objectives of the study to the students to ensure that they give true responses and asked them to answer the items of the questionnaire. 151 students responded to the questionnaire.

#### 7. Data Analysis

This study is mainly a quantitative research. The responses of the participants were analyzed statistically. The mean and standard deviation of each item in the questionnaire were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Studies (SPSS).

#### 8. Finding of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of using smartphones in learning English language skills among Taibah University students depending on the their responses. To answer the first question " What are the students' perspectives about the role of smartphones in learning English language skills ?", means and standard deviations of the students' responses were calculated and analyzed using SPSS program. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Means and standard deviations of Students' Perspectives about the role of Smartphones in Learning English Language Skills**

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance
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1.	Using the smartphone motivates me to learn.	3.58	1.272	Moderate
2.	I use the smartphone to attain and save new information .	3.71	1.304	Moderate
3.	I enjoy learning when I use the smartphone applications.	3.68	1.422	Moderate
4.	I like to respond to my peers' discussions via smartphones.	3.32	1.388	Moderate
5.	I like to use smartphones to post questions and talk about reading materials with my peers.	3.33	1.450	Moderate
6.	Smartphones are necessary for me to learn English language.	3.53	1.473	Moderate
7.	I like to share what I learn via my smartphone with my peers to improve my English language skills.	3.29	1.504	Moderate
8.	I use my smartphone to learn new English vocabulary items.	3.56	1.374	Moderate
9.	I use my smartphone to learn the correct pronunciation of English vocabulary items.	3.45	1.535	Moderate
10.	I use my smartphone to learn the correct spelling of new English vocabulary items.	3.55	1.408	Moderate
11.	I use my mobile phone in knowledge retention.	3.43	1.329	Moderate
12.	Using smartphones motivates me to study hard.	3.40	1.357	Moderate
13.	I use my smartphone to check the material I learn.	3.48	1.423	Moderate
14.	I use educational smartphone applications to share documents and files with my peers.	3.26	1.467	Moderate
15.	I use my smartphone to reduce my misconceptions in English learning.	3.38	1.446	Moderate
16.	Smartphones are necessary for me to learn English language.	3.53	1.473	Moderate
17.	I use my smartphone to listen to English native speakers.	3.28	1.421	Moderate
18.	I use my smartphone to take online English tests.	2.88	1.419	Moderate
19.	I visit different English learning websites via my smartphone to learn English language skills.	3.13	1.355	Moderate
20.	I use my smartphone to share useful English educational applications with my peers and friends.	3.21	1.486	Moderate
	Total	3.40	1.415	Moderate

Data presented in Table (1) shows that the participants have moderate attitudes towards using their smartphones in learning English language skills. Their overall mean on the above items was (3.40) out of (5). This result is considered moderate as it is in the moderate rank (2.8- 3.9). The high rank is (4.00-5) and the weak rank is (1.00- 2.7).

The previous Table shows that students, according to their opinions, think that smartphones are important and useful in simplifying the process of learning English. They think that using smartphones could make the learning process easier through downloading their educational applications that help in motivating students and break the routine of traditional learning. Depending on the fact that the majority of students have smartphones (mean= 4.57), students responded to the items of the questionnaire that focused on learning via smartphones positively. For example, they used them in learning the correct pronunciation and spelling of English vocabulary items ( the mean for this item was 3.45) , checking the material they learn (the mean for this item was 3.48), reducing their misconceptions in English learning (the mean for this item was 3.38) , posting questions and making discussions about topics covered inside the classrooms (the mean for this item was 3.33) , and listening to native English speakers (the mean for this item was 3.28). Besides, the participants were motivated and enjoyed learning through using their smartphones in attaining and saving educational data (the mean for this item was 3.68). They, according to their responses, helped them in saving educational information and in knowledge retention (the mean for this item was 3.71).

Learning through smartphones according to the students could make them independent learners. They help them in changing their thinking while dealing with new topics through depending on different sources to understand the target topics. They can share information and applications that give them enough data to understand the topics discussed with their teachers and classmates in the classrooms.

To answer the second question "What are the difficulties of using smartphones in learning English language skills regarding students' opinions?", means and standard deviations of the students' opinions were calculated and analyzed through SPSS program. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Students' Attitudes towards Difficulties of Smartphone Learning**

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance
	I have a smartphone.	4.57	1.152	High
	I use my smartphone only for making calls.	2.16	1.479	Low
	Using the smartphone makes me feel nervous.	2.27	1.243	Low
	Using the smartphone makes me feel bored.	2.29	1.236	Low
	I need some help to use the smartphone.	2.05	1.467	Low
	I use the smartphone only for entertainment.	3.09	1.503	Moderate
	I do not have time to use mobile phone in learning.	2.50	1.264	Low
	I do not like to do assignments via smartphones.	2.60	1.400	Low
	I do not think that the smartphones are ideal for learning English.	2.79	1.590	Moderate
	I do not know how to use the smartphone applications.	2.57	1.486	Low
	Total	2.69	1.382	Low

Data presented in Table (2) shows that the participants have low attitudes towards the second question which was about the difficulties faced by students while using their smartphones in learning English language skills. Their overall mean on the above items was (2.69) out of (5). This result is considered low as it is in the low rank (1.00- 2.7). The moderate rank is (2.8- 3.9) and the high rank is (4.00-5).

The above Table shows that students do not have difficulties in using their smartphones in learning English. They think that smartphones are easy to be used and do not face problems or difficulties while using them. Their responses indicate that they may need some instructions to deal with these technological tools. For example, the item that mentioned that students need some help while using smartphones had the lowest mean (2.05). This means that students do not need help to use their smartphones. They could need some instructions to utilize their smartphones in educational environment. Besides, they feel happy and enjoyable when using their mobiles. For example, using their smartphones do not make them nervous (the mean for this item was 2.27) or bored (the mean for this item was 2.29) since they use them in their daily life for different purposes such as entertainment (the mean for this item was 3.09), making calls (the mean for this item was 2.16) and contacting with others via social media applications. In addition, the students feel that they do not have any problems regarding time when using their smartphones. The mean for the item "I do not have time to use mobile phone in learning" was 2.5 out of 5 which means that they have time to use them in learning English language skills. Using smartphones in the process of learning depending on the students' answers do not have any problems for the learners. They use them in their daily life events easily. They enjoy using them without any problems. Depending on this fact, they are welcome to do their assignments, supplementary exercises needed to enhance their understanding, and homework via their smartphones.

## 9. Discussions of the findings

The first question of the study explored the students' perspectives about the role of smartphones in learning English language skills. The results according to the students' answers were positive with a moderate usage of their smartphones in their attempt to learn English. This result might be an indicator to decision makers and curriculum designers to make use of the smartphones and their applications while developing and improving English curriculum. They should "shift from traditional curricula to include new technology in the teaching

process" (Ababneh ,2017: 127). They might include them to be as supplementary tools to help students in their learning since the majority of them have up to date smartphones nowadays. This step may help students to be independent learners and motivate them to think, search and find enough data needed to understand topics discussed inside the classroom. This result is consistent with the results of Ababneh (2017). It is clear from these findings that the using smartphones in learning English has a positive effect on learners. This conclusion is supported by a number of past studies, including work by Abbasi and Hashemi ( 2013) Kanchana and Saha (2015), Nalliveetil and Alenazi (2016) , Elfeky and Masadeh (2016), Alkhezzi and Al-Dousary (2016) , Machmud and Abdulah (2017) , and Farrah and Abu-Dawood (2018).

The second question of this study investigated the difficulties of using smartphones in learning English. Depending on the students' opinions and perspectives, there were no difficulties faced them during their learning via smartphones. They were motivated towards using their smart phones. The students might need some instructions to use their smartphones appropriately to attain information about the target topics. It is an expected result since all generations of smartphones have smarter features that could be used anywhere and for everything without any difficulties. "Such technological devices may make the educational environment differ from the traditional way that concentrates completely on the classroom in giving information to learners to a new way of learning outside the classroom" ( Ta'amneh, 2017: 143). This result corresponded with results of past studies which found that smartphones could be used to motivate students and enhance English language learning ( 2013) Kanchana and Saha (2015), Nalliveetil and Alenazi (2016) , Elfeky and Masadeh (2016), Alkhezzi and Al-Dousary (2016) , Machmud and Abdulah (2017) , and Farrah and Abu-Dawood (2018). On the other hand, this result did not match with the result of Al Fawareh and Jusoh (2017) who found that smartphones had negative effects on their participants who had the feelings of uncomfortably when smartphones were not with them.

## 10. Conclusion

The limited time allocation for English subject is considered as one of the obstacles faced English learners while learning English language skills. Sometimes, EFL teachers do not have enough time to cover all the required topics inside the classroom. Students may need extra time to study and understand the discussed topics through available technological tools. This research investigated the students' perspectives about the role of smartphones in learning English language skills. The participants had positive attitudes towards using smartphones in their learning. Their responses confirmed that using their smartphones may facilitate the learning process and motivate them to be positive in the classroom. The researcher suggested other researchers to conduct similar studies by using a larger sample in other regions to have more comprehensive results.

## 11. Limitations of the study

The results of this study are limited by these factors:

- 1- The study was confined to the students at Taibah University at the first semester of the academic years 2019/2020, and thus, the results obtained cannot be generalized to other universities or other students in different regions. A study with other levels could have different results.
- 2- The study was conducted during the first semester of the school year 2019/2020. A longer duration might have different outcomes.

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