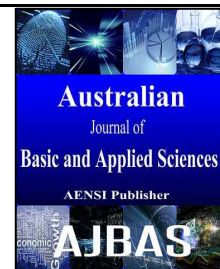




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The Effectiveness of Using Mobile Phone in Enhancing Writing Skills: Teacher’s and Students’ Reflections

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ABSTRACT

**Background:** Mobile phone with its capacity to compute, download and deliver multimedia content offers exciting new frontiers in pedagogy for teaching writing which is the most neglected and difficult skill. It offers autonomy to students and a new teaching tool and pedagogy immensely helpful for teachers enabling them to enter the digital era of technology for teaching and learning writing skills by relinquishing the conventional pedagogy. **Objective:** The objectives of this qualitative paper are to investigate whether the utilization of mobile phone in the classroom enhances the descriptive writing skills of the Pakistani intermediate students. It also investigates whether students’ engagement was enhanced after using the mobile phone. It also investigates teacher’s and students’ reflections on the usage of mobile phone on writing skills. **Results:** The findings indicated that other than being effective in teaching writing skills the use of mobile phone made the students more engaged and motivated towards writing skills. The findings also revealed students’ and teacher’s positive reflections about its usage. **Conclusion:** The study provided evidence that the usage of mobile phone in writing skills offers cooperation, collaboration, face to face interaction, fun learning and creates conducive learning environment in the classroom. In addition, it has some pedagogical implications on the usage of mobile phone as a tool to enhance students’ writing skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Learning English language is increasingly becoming the very goal of a large number of people around the globe in the present day world (Schramma & Srinivasan, 2015). And the people of the developing countries like Pakistan are also trying their utmost to be part of the developed world by learning English which according to House (2003) and Jenkins (2013) is the “lingua franca” of the globe. However, among the four language skills, writing is the most neglected and difficult skills in Pakistani context (Haider, 2012). The conventional pedagogical fashions of teaching writing skills are not sufficiently helpful for adequately learning and mastering this receptive skills. In Pakistan, writing skills poses enormous problems for teachers as well as students. This, therefore, requires a modern tool and approach that can comprehensively deal with the important task like writing skills to tailor to the students’ specific needs for enhancing their writing skills.

The rapidly progressing m-learning pedagogies are eclipsing rather replacing conventional styles of teaching language skills. Listening, speaking and reading skills are being taught successfully with mobile phones. However, writing, the most difficult skills (Dixon & Nessel, 1983) can also be taught with cell phones. As in this connection, Prensky (2005, p.1) asserted: “What can you learn from a cell phone? Almost anything!”. The present day mobile phones are feature-rich miniature multimedia computers, having features such as higher capacity for connectivity, built in virtual keyboards to enter text easily, touch screen with high resolution user interface and multitudes of downloadable applications (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010). All these features provide an immense opportunity for English language teachers to use them for the enhancement of writing skills.

1.1 Problem Statement:

Writing skills hold not only extremely important place vis-a-vis other three language skills but

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according to Dixon and Nessel (1983) they are too difficult to instruct. And this difficulty increases manifold when they are imparted especially to non-native speakers of English language. The large number of failures of intermediate students of the Punjab, Pakistan indicate that writing is really not less than a challenge for the students as well as the teachers in Pakistan. Even in the Central Superior Service exams “Only two per cent of successful candidates obtained more than 60 per cent marks in the English essay part of the exam in the last few years” (Fpsc.gov.pk, 2015).

According to Sultana and Zaki (2015) intermediate students are unable to write correct English as is required of them. In addition several studies have addressed problems of writing skills encountered by Pakistani intermediate students (Khan, Javaid & Farooq, 2015; Shahzadie, Mushtaq & Khan, 2014; Haider, 2012; Haider, 2014a; Haider, 2014b; Sarfraz, 2011; Gulzar, Jilani & Javid, 2013;). However, the conventional pedagogical styles employed by the teachers have been associated with the poor performance of intermediate students (Kiran, 2010). A study by Warsi (2004) reveals that conventional methods like translation are to be blamed for the quite unsatisfactory performance of students in writing.

Therefore, in Pakistani context Sultana and Zaki (2015) propose that there is “pressing need” to make use of new techniques and methods for English language teaching. However, to address pedagogical issues the following studies have advocated the use of ICTs (Shah and Empungan, 2015; Drigas and Charami, 2014; Ali, Ahmed and Bukhari, 2011; Shaikh and Khoja, 2011). Therefore, the important issue like writing skills can also be addressed with the help of mobile phone usage as mobile phones have been tried in the teaching of all other skills except writing and this is evident from the following research by Aziz, Shamim, Aziz and Avais (2013); Cavus and Ibrahim (2009); Dansieh (2011); Power and Shrestha (2010); Baleghizadeh and Oladrostam (2010) done in the domain of Mobile Assisted Language Learning. Since to date, there is no research in MALL, according to Mancilla (2014) that has addressed the writing skills of second language learners, it would be a new idea to teach this skill with the mobile phone. Also, according to Park and Slater (2015) many L2 students are already making use of cell phones in their daily lives for language learning purposes. Therefore, mobile phones can be used for enhancing writing skills also.

The modern trends of using ICTs, MALL and almost 100% ownership of mobile phones among intermediate students paved the way for the teacher to employ mobile phone to enhance the writing skills.

### **1.2 Objectives of the study:**

The main aim of this qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness of mobile phone for the instruction of descriptive essay writing. However, the teacher had envisaged the following objectives to direct the research:

1. To investigate whether the usage of mobile phone in the classroom enhances students’ descriptive writing skills.
2. To investigate whether students’ engagement in writing English essay enhanced after using mobile phone.
3. To investigate whether students were motivated to write English descriptive essay.
4. To investigate the teacher’s and students’ reflections on the usage of mobile phone on writing skills.

### **1.3 Research Questions:**

**The study was directed by the following questions:**

1. Whether the usage of mobile phone in the classroom enhanced students’ descriptive writing skills?
2. Whether students’ engagement in writing English essay was enhanced after using mobile phone?
3. Whether students were motivated to write English descriptive essay?
4. What are the changes in teacher’s and students’ reflections on the usage of mobile phone on writing skills?

### **2. Literature Review:**

Drexler, Dawson and Ferdig (2007) opined that digital tools have the potential to produce positive results in improving the orientation of students towards writing skills. Also, digital devices simultaneously increase self-confidence, self-expression and above all their engagement to learn writing (Fageeh, 2011).

In the year 2011, Pakistan had more than 30 million Netizens or internet users (Sanou, 2011) whereas almost 15 million people did browsing via mobile phone. And now the number of netizens have obviously raised which makes the introduction of mobile phone easier for the teaching of essay writing skills.

Also, Thornton and Houser (2005) proposed the use of cell phone for writing reports and for essay writing because Asian students are very much expert in entering text in mobile phone more than they can do with a computer.

In addition to many others, the studies (Aziz, Shamim, Aziz, and Avais, 2013; Hayati, Jalilifar and Mashhadi, 2013; Power and Shrestha, 2010; Yousaf & Ahmed, 2013; Waqar, 2014) employed hand phones to instruct the skills related to listening, speaking and reading. And to fill this research gap, the researcher has tried to teach descriptive essay writing with the help of mobile phone.

According to Altmer (2011), the ICTs with the multimedia capabilities like audios, videos have the potential to uplift the level of students' motivation. And knowledge is gained "more deeply when ideas are expressed in words and pictures rather than in words alone" (Mayer, 2001, p. ix). In addition the study by Ciampa, (2014) investigated the experiences of both students and teachers who employed mobile phones in classroom. The study found out that the motivation was enhanced by the use of mobile phones in the teaching learning environment. Likewise, Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) found out that the digital devices were not only successful for educational or language learning purposes rather they had the element of fun and enjoyment.

In addition, Littlewood, (1981 & 2011; Cheng, Hwang, Shadiev and Xie, (2010)) proposed that the use of mobile phone can help improve English language skills. The study by Ghaith (2010) showed that basic language skills of persuasive writing can be attained with the help of ICTs as the student of present day world is a "Universal digital native". In addition the research (Shah & Empungan, 2015; Trilling & Fidel, 2009) also favours ICTs for learning purposes. Likewise, Lee (2015) investigated the difference of effect caused by the use of hand phone as compared to computer. The study showed that in addition to many other benefits, the academic motivation was uplifted and there was improvement in flow state (complete absorption in the undertaken task) as well due to the use of mobile phone.

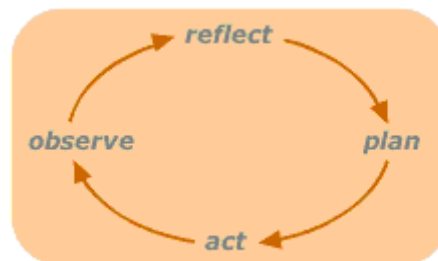
In addition, Park and Slater (2015) claim that a large number of L2 students of English language are already employing mobile devices every day for diverse purposes, including language learning. Therefore, it is the right time to make the best use of this device for the enhancement of students' writing skills. Also, CALL has been replaced by MALL as is the demand of the fast moving era, Yamaguchi (2005:57) opines that "... mobile phone is superior to a computer in portability. And some students don't have their own computer".

Likewise, a study by (Chen, Chung & Yen 2012) shows that cell phones are flexible tools which have the potential to be exploited to cater to the students' language learning needs. Similarly, Miller (2014) also opines that smart phones are being adopted unprecedentedly by youth and they are potentially the tools for future study technologies. In addition, according to (Huang, Huang, Huang & Lin, 2012) cell phone technologies are attracting the attention of both teachers as well as students being low cost, small sized, easy to handle and fast.

In the similar vein, Pellerin (2014) examined the use of mobile technologies for teaching of language. The findings showed that the use of these modern devices allowed students to create their own language tasks. Likewise, Alemi, Sarab and Lari (2012) found out that there was significant difference in the performance of those who used mobile phone-

based SMS. Likewise, Ally, Tin, & Woodburn (2011) conducted an iPhone-based research for the teaching of grammar and vocabulary for elementary students. The findings were in favour of iPhone as the students wanted more lesson with these gadgets.

The theoretical framework of the study is based on action research proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart. (1988, p.14.18). The following diagram by them clarifies the process of action research:



It is evident from the diagram that first of all the issue is observed and the data is recorded. Then those observations are reflected upon and are interpreted to better understand the issue. And a plan is made for the action to address the problem. At the end the plan is executed resulting in the cyclic process which starts when the results are observed, recorded as well as shared.

## 2. Methodology:

This qualitative study is actually based on the action research undertaken by a teacher with the students of Muhammadan Anglo Oriental (M.A.O) College, Lahore during his posting in 2014. He taught English to the intermediate classes by using mobile phone to address the writing issue of the students as almost all of them had mobile phones in their possession. The samples were the 40 male mixed ability intermediate students of M.A.O. College, Lahore. Their ages ranged between 17 to 18 years. Their proficiency in English was almost equal as it was also evident from their first year results. Students were actually regular students of the said college and took part in the activities of the action research which lasted up to 6 weeks not only willingly but happily as well. However, by designing very simple descriptive essay writing exercises, the teacher strived to engage them in the actual writing process.

### Pretest and Posttest:

The teacher also had pretest to gauge the level of their performance in the writing skills. At the end of the action research a posttest was also held by administering the same descriptive essay topic that was given in the pretest. The purpose of the posttest was to gauge whether the utilization of mobile phone enhanced the students' writing skills. However, the posttest showed improvement in their writing skills.

**Research Procedure:**

During the 50 minutes period, the teacher sent the topic of the descriptive essay writing via SMS for the students to brainstorm while students were placed in heterogamous groups. In a team, students had face to face interaction and through cooperative and collaborative learning students constructed the essay simultaneously having fun learning experience with mobile phone. Students downloaded, discussed and collaboratively wrote and edited the descriptive essays of their peers. At the end, each group presented through their group leaders and the teacher evaluated and gave gifts to the best performer group.

Students were sent the SMS in the classroom as well as after the college hours and sometimes till almost 11 pm for feedback. And it is noteworthy that even outside the classroom, the teacher answered students' queries about certain writing related issues and feedback continued from and to the teacher.

**3.1 Data Collection:**

Data were collected by the researcher using the following three research tools: they were interviews, observations and SMSs exchanged with students by the teacher.

**3.2 Interviews:**

The researcher conducted interviews from time to time with the teacher and the students. Sometimes, there were group interviews and the other time, one to one interviews with the sole purpose of eliciting the qualitative comments from them. The students were ensured that all their talk and comments about the learning process via mobile phones would be taken as confidential and their names will not be divulged at any stage, before, during or after the research. The interviews were holistically analyzed to frame emerging key themes regarding the insight of the issue under discussion i.e. the teaching of writing skills by means of mobile phones.

**3.3 Observations:**

The researchers observed every lesson and maintained a diary, simultaneously with the start of activities done with the students, to make reflective notes as has been suggested by (Nunan, 1989). The diary included not only the whole blue print of the activities but also the researcher committed to paper the feelings of students about the writing skills done with the mobile phones and its effects as well as the comments they passed about this newly introduced tool for the writing skill.

**3.4 SMS Exchanged with Students:**

The teacher also used the SMS feature of mobile phone as a tool to teach descriptive essay writing to intermediate students. Pictures and video clips related to the essay topics were sent to students to engage them in brain storming the topic. Then the wording of the topic was sent. After that that they

downloaded the material related to the essay of the day and exchanged with each other in the form of groups and wrote after discussion point by point. And since, the topic did not complete within the stipulated time (50 minutes) and it continued the next day as their classes were 6 days a week. Also occasionally, the teacher gave them the feedback when he was at home after the end of the class and even during the holidays to keep them engaged, focused and bound within the learning process.

**4. Findings and Discussions:****4.1 Usage of Mobile phone:**

The employment of mobile phone in the classroom enhanced the descriptive essay writing skills of the intermediate students. The students who hardly were active during the writing skills before were found to be more enthusiastic and active when cell phone was used for writing skills. All the class seemed to have been energetic and involved that was not the case before. Though there are still mistakes and errors of commissions and omissions in their writing but now they were more ready to do the writing tasks enthusiastically and happily. Here is the example of writing from respondent "A": "I want a profession of *engnering* in my life. Reason:because I made a big officer in my country and made as a *enginiar* and serve the *humanity* in Pakistan through technology." However, there are many errors and mistakes in their writing but since they are committed to write, it is expected that they can improve in the due course of time. Before the use of mobile phone for the writing skills, their mean scores in writing skills for pre-test was 7.5 to 8 out of 15 and after the employment of cell phone the mean score improved to 12.5 out of 15. In addition, there was improvement in their spellings, mechanics, sentence structure, supporting details, grammar and organization of the writing. It really enhanced their writing skills.

**4.2 Students' Engagement:**

Students' engagement in writing English essay was enhanced after using mobile phone. When they were sent the feedback by their teacher even after the college was off or even during holidays. It was found out students were more spirited and eager to involve in writing activities and asked for more such activities. Respondent "B" who was the most active during the research reflected in the following words: "The activity is superb .... Useful, constructive activity and a easily way to remain in touch with studies and our guides, our teachers even during vocations".

Also, even during the classroom, instead talking to each other or looking here and there, all the students were seen to be engaged only with their writing via mobile phone. However, this confirms what Fageeh (2011) claims about cell phone learning that it enhances students' engagement in writing

skills. Also, this is direct in line with Lee (2015) who shows that cell phones helped achieve “flow state” or extensive absorption in the task given.

#### **4.3 Students’ Motivation:**

The students were motivated to write English descriptive essay. And responded “C” reflected: “... it was interesting because it shows we r using this device for some good purpose...” Respondent “D” reflected by saying:” I became able to think that I should do some more in the same way and I’ve started making notes on my mobile and I found it easier.” It corroborates what Thornton Houser (2005) claims that Asian students are good at entering data in mobile than they do with computers.

Likewise, this also confirms what Altimer (2011) claims that ICTs can raise the level of motivation of students and it is in the line of Mayer (2001) as well, who opines that language learning takes place more deeply when multimedia are used. It is also important to note that students from some other intermediate classes of the same college were also attracted towards the action research group and wanted to be part of the action research and most of them approached the college principal also for this purpose.

#### **4.4 Teacher’s Reflections:**

The teacher’s reflections indicated that the use of mobile phone had positive impact in enhancing students’ writing skills. The teacher found out that the students not only scored better, but also were more motivated and engaged in writing essay. The teacher found out that students were excited and wanted to do more exercises related to writing skills as compared to their past lethargic behaviour towards writing skills. It is also noteworthy that the teacher also enjoyed the writing tasks done with the students.

#### **4.5 Students’ Reflections:**

There students also showed positive reflections on the usage of mobile phone in writing skills. All were motivated, engaged and told that they improved their writing and enjoyed doing writing. Here are views of respondent “E” about use of mobile phone: “This simple way is easier and effective near to me ... authentic as well.” And other excerpt from responded “F” says: I’ve experienced that due to that beautiful and positive activity.” The students felt more happy and encouraging when they received feedback from the teacher and tried to improve more in its light. Almost all of them found the aspect of fun and enjoyment while doing writing in groups with mobile phone which confirms what Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) claim about the learning through mobile phones is fun and enjoyment.

The students learnt how writing can be learnt cooperatively and collaboratively while downloading, discussing, writing and editing with the help of their peers in their groups. Also, they did

not share writing only within their groups but among other groups also. After they underwent this action research experience concerning essay writing, they made less mistakes or errors related to grammar, mechanics, coherence and cohesion. They are now able to write the introduction, body and conclusion of the essay coherently and cohesively.

#### **5. Conclusion:**

This study entails substantial implications on the teaching as well as learning of the writing skills in and outside the classroom. The findings reveal that the use of mobile phone for teaching writing skills is very effective and turns the class into a student centered learning as compared to the conventional methods. In addition, it helps engage the students and they are not only motivated rather writing becomes fun and enjoyment for them.

Therefore, the findings of this research are helpful for Pakistani teachers in general and the Text Book Board in particular. The teachers can use cell phones to teach writing skills and the Text Book Board can incorporate cell phone-based writing exercises and upload on its website the addresses of some helpful sites supportive to enhance the writing skills. However, more research can be carried out in other areas like short story writing, short answer writing and letter writing included in intermediate course in Pakistan. This research involved only 40 students lasting for a period of 6 weeks; as such it has paved a way for further studies with larger samples and time duration so that the effects of mobile phone usage are determined in imparting writing skills in the domain of ESL. This is a qualitative study as such it is very much hoped that the future researchers will also use quantitative data to investigate the effects of mobile phone in the writing skills with different age and gender groups.

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