Why Have We Used Mobile Phones in Teaching English Writing Skills?

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Mobile devices play a crucial role in supporting language teaching and learning at universities. As a popular and fast means of communication, mobile phones can potentially enhance the quality of teaching and learning English in many EFL contexts, like Vietnam. This study focuses on the application of mobile pedagogy to help teach English writing for academic purposes (EAP). A pre-course questionnaire was offered to 80 English major students to determine their attitudes toward writing skills and their learning difficulties. Then the students were required to use text messages for the circular writing of different common topics and to keep a blogs, portfolios, or diaries with mobile phones to share their reflections. The teacher's comments and feedback also supported them in improving their English writing skills. The implications of using mobile pedagogy in teaching EAP, particularly writing skills, are suggested in this study in order to create practical language lessons at other institutions.

Keywords: mobile phones, writing skills, texting messages

INTRODUCTION

The world's educational environment has changed considerably due to many factors of which technology is considered the most influential one. In fact, technology is rapidly changing education, compelling instructors to be familiar with various mobile learning devices and formulate strategies to incorporate technology into the curriculum to meet the changing needs of their students (Jackson, Snider, Masek, & Baham, 2014). Mobile devices have become a more popular tool that has supported and impacted both teachers and learners in their teaching and learning process in many universities in the world generally and in

Vietnam particularly. Actually, Zhang (2015) and Hamm, Drysdale, and Moore (2014) indicate that mobile technology has been recognized as one of the most important innovations that has influenced teaching and learning.

As a major element of mobile pedagogy, mobile learning is known as "learning that is facilitated and enhanced by the use of digital mobile devices that can be carried out and used anywhere and anytime" (O'Connell & Smith, 2007, p. 29−32). In our current times, mobile pedagogy has become more and more prevalent because it has changed the ways of teaching and designing or creating lectures that are different from the traditional ones.

The number of mobile users is steadily increasing − in 2016, 100% of K-12 students used mobile handheld devices for education, but in 2012, the ESCAR Study Undergraduate Students and Information Technology confirmed that 62% of students own a smartphone (Hamm, Drysdale, & Moore, 2014). A Pew Research Center study also found that one in three teens sends more than 100 text messages a day with at least 70% of 17-year-olds texting daily (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). That is to say, the young people's tendency to use mobile phones in their daily activities is increasing around the world, which affects their studies and work dramatically. To face this issue, some educators, specifically teachers, have taken advantage of the mobile devices' potential to improve the quality of language teaching.

Concerning the learning of the four English language skills, the writing skill is one of the most difficult ones. According to Shalbag (2017), many students panic with writing tasks, especially when such tasks require pen and paper because of the linguistic complexity of these tasks. Moreover, some students frequently complain that as soon as they pick up their pencils, their minds go blank. Also, some of them are afraid of the mistakes that they might make in spelling, grammar, mechanics, or vocabulary when they start writing their tasks. Therefore, they prefer using their mobile phones, which can help them automatically correct those errors mentioned above in the English writing classes.

Due to the previously addressed issues relating to the benefits of mobile pedagogy, the increasing number of mobile phone users, and the learning of writing, as it is the most challenging language skill, our study focused on mobile phone applications to teach English writing skills, which requires a lot of time for learners to practice.

Our research aimed to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What are student's attitudes toward English writing skills and their learning difficulties?

RQ2. How can students improve their writing skills with the use of mobile phones?

RQ3. What are some ways for learners using mobile phones to develop English writing skills?

MOBILE PEDAGOGY APPLICATION INTO TEACHING WRITING SKILLS

Benefits and Challenges of Mobile Pedagogy in Teaching and Learning a Language

Liu, Navarrete, Maradiegue, and Wivagg (2014) indicate that the literature on mobile pedagogy has identified such affordances as (a) flexibility and accessibility, (b) interactivity, and (c) motivation and engagement. When students can use mobile devices to study at home and outside the class, teachers are also able to incorporate these devices into activities by bringing the real world into the classroom. In addition, students can take advantage of mobile devices' technological advances to get information and materials such as electronic books, newspapers, and video recordings, as well as interact and collaborate with other students. In fact, multimedia devices have brought learners a high autonomous capacity over their own learning process, particularly in language learning.

According to Sana (2017), English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers can benefit from this technology in a number of ways, especially since the use of mobile phones can extend far beyond the classroom, where it is more convenient for the student. In fact, with one smartphone, a student can easily access the Internet to search for any kind of learning resource anywhere and anytime. In the study conducted by Abbasi and Hashemi (2013), the use of mobile phones had a great impact on the EFL learners' vocabulary retention. Taking into consideration the use of mobile phones in language learning, Ally, McGreal, Schafer, Tin, and Cheung (2007) and Darmi and Albion (2014) have indicated that using mobile phones increased students' abilities to

enhance their English language learning.

Nevertheless, each issue always has two sides: positive and negative. Mobile pedagogy is not an exception. One common challenge for teachers is how to manage the classroom with mobile devices. For an effective lesson, teachers have to ensure that all the devices are charged and updated to run properly. Teachers take the role of both device managers and educators, which can potentially overwhelm them. Moreover, student–teacher interactions also require some adaptations on the part of the teacher. In addition, the teacher must also learn how to handle the independent nature of a mobile device. On the other hand, a high-quality mobile phone is sometimes too expensive for a student, and limited mobile storage space may prevent them from storing large multimedia contents suitable for their learning (Mtega, Bernard, Msungu, & Sanare, 2012). Thus, there should be some solutions to deal with these obstacles to using mobile phones for language learning.

Using Mobile Phones' Text Messaging Feature in Teaching English Writing Skills

This study concentrated on using mobile phones in teaching English writing skills, presenting several techniques of the text messaging function. Among the 20 practical ways to use mobile phones to support second language learning recommended by Reinders (2010), there are several ways that phones can improve writing skills. Students can use the "Notes" feature to practice writing skills with tasks given by teachers. Reinders (2010) also added that students can use the text messaging feature for circular writing, where they are able to create a story together by contributing one text message at a time.

Each student writes a sentence or two and then sends this to the next student, who adds another message, and so on until the story is complete. This mobile phone function is really effective for students who want to improve their writing skills with different topics such as news reports, instructions, brochures, warnings, short stories, etc. by using social networks like blogs and Facebook (Melor, Lau, & Hadi, 2013; Mancas, 2014).

Furthermore, using mobile phones to keep a blog is considered a more advanced form of writing task. Students can use text messaging and camera features to add messages and post pictures to their personal

blogs. Figure 1 shows five main steps in writing blogs to improve students' writing skills. Teachers can read blogs and write comments or provide feedback on their reflections on writing skill progress.

Blog Quick Start Guide: 5 steps

Step 1: topic
CHOOSE A TOPIC YOU ARE PASSIONATE AND CURIOUS ABOUT

Step 2: hosting
SIGN UP FOR HOSTING. MY PICK← BLUEHOST →CHOOSE YOUR DOMAIN NAME

Step 3: wordpress
INSTALL WORDPRESS & SET UP BLOG TIME

Step 5: social
SIGN UP FOR SOCIAL NETWORKS TO PROMOTE YOUR WORK AND INTERACT WITH YOUR

Step 4: content
START CREATING CONTENT BY EXPERIENCING + EXPLORING YOUR TOPIC. SHARE YOUR DISCOVERIES ON YOU BLOG VIA PHOTOS, STORIES AND TAKEAWAYS (E.G. RECIPES)
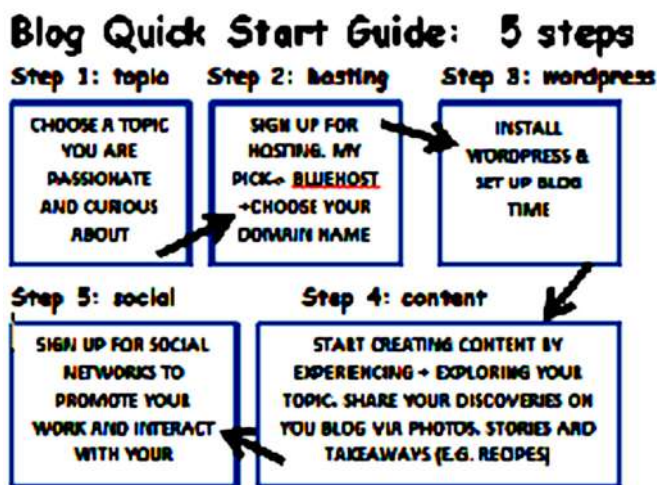
FIGURE 1. Five steps of creating blogs to improve English writing skills.

Furthermore, via mobile phones, students are able to access some useful websites to improve their grammatical knowledge (e.g., Grammarly, Grammar Girl, Grammar Book, Grammar Monster), vocabulary (Thesaurus), and writing styles (The Purdue Online Writing Lab, Writer's Digest University, Hemingway App, Pro Writing Aid). In brief, using the mobile phone's text messaging feature in teaching and learning a language has motivated us to conduct our research on its application to teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) at our university, Hue University of Foreign Languages (HUFL).

Previous Studies on Using Mobile Phones in Teaching and Learning English Writing Skills

In the era of advanced technology, there have been many studies on the application of mobile pedagogy in teaching and learning English language, especially for the writing skills. Ecem and Ebru (2018) determined the effects of using Twitter with micro-blogging on the EFL students' academic writing in Turkey. Learners in this technology's

world are regarded as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Meanwhile, teachers, the so-called "digital immigrants," use Twitter hashtags to ask their students to write English sentences about daily topics and then give immediate feedback to those sentences. Through this method, students can increase improvements in their English writing skills.

By studying the teaching and learning of English in a Korean higher education context, Shin (2014) discovered that the pedagogical gap between English as a foreign language (EFL) students and native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) has had some significant impacts on EFL education. This means that EFL learning and teaching has been greatly considered by many educators and scholars in Korea. Concerning the application of modern technology devices into the EFL education in Korea, Steyn (2014) states that the advances in technology has had a tremendous impact on the EFL landscape in Korea, which is proud of having the highest per capita high-speed Internet access of all the countries in Asia. Thus, Korean students now have access to social and international news and other social networking sites at almost any time with modern electronic devices like laptops, iPads, and mobile phones to improve their English writing skills. In fact, O'Donnell (2018) believes that despite some difficulties in English learning, particularly writing skills due to the Korean socio-cultural and educational environment and the significant differences between English and Korean letters and writing, there have been some innovative uses of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that are specifically related to the EFL/ESL context. Through the use of the vast resources offered, CALL can increase motivation and enhance student achievement by impacting the students' attitudes and helping them feel more independent (Lee, 2000). Besides, with the online learning approach, there are a variety of advantages applicable to any blended or online program that provides learners with numerous opportunities to apply mobile phones in improving their English writing skills. Huang and Liu (2000) suggest that computer-assisted language learning most likely reduces the learner's anxiety and enhances their communicative skills in English.

A study conducted by Thornton and Houser (2004) on providing vocabulary instruction through short message service (SMS) indicates that students using SMS learn more than twice the number of vocabulary words as the students who receive materials through email, and that SMS helps students improve their scores by nearly twice as much as the scores of students who received their lessons on paper. When their

amount of vocabulary is increased, the students find it easier to enhance their writing ability in English. Concerning using SMS in learning English vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, two researchers, Kennedy and Levy (2008), carried out a program similar to the one by Thornton and Houser (2004) and got similar results in Australia when they sent vocabulary and idioms, definitions, and example sentences via SMS in a scheduled pattern. They then obtained the feedback in the form of quizzes and follow-up questions. That is to say, using SMS significantly improved the learner's English writing skills.

To explore Vietnamese learners' experience and attitudes towards mobile phone use in learning English writing skills, Dang (2013) determined that most students are highly interested in using mobile phones in writing blogs, diaries, or portfolios in English, which may help them complete their writing tasks, as well as practice their writing on various topics in daily life. Since this technology has been taken into consideration by many researchers and educators due to its potential contributions to language learning in general and English writing skills in particular, more and more students often use mobile phones in order to develop their writing techniques in English.

In brief, with a variety of studies in the world in general and in Asian countries in particular, such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, on the use of mobile phones in learning writing skills, we can conclude that this electronic device application is on the rise in teaching and learning English writing techniques in non-native English-speaking countries due to its previously mentioned benefits.

METHOD

This study was conducted for one semester as part of an English writing course for students majoring in English language at HUFL. With the participation of 80 second-year students over 15 weeks, our research was implemented in two phases. In the first phase, we designed a "pre-use mobile pedagogy questionnaire" to discover the students' attitudes towards English writing skills and their learning difficulties. In the second phase, we implemented a teaching experiment with the method of using text messaging on mobile phones to improve English writing skills. Every week, students were offered some writing tasks on

different topics shown in the textbook *NorthStar Reading and Writing 3* (Barton & Sardinas, 2015). Students could use mobile phones to write emails, instant messages (IM), texts, blogs, and diaries, and share their writing with their partners or teachers. We then created an "after-use mobile pedagogy questionnaire" to reveal the students' reflections on their writing progress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 80 responses shown in two tables are categorized under five headings: Those who strongly agreed (A), those who agreed (B), those who expressed no attitude (neither agreed nor disagreed; C), those who disagreed (D), and those who strongly disagreed (E). The number of responses for each item under each of these five categories was calculated.

The study's results were mainly concerned about the students' attitudes towards English writing skills and their learning obstacles. Most of the students didn't like to write for the following reasons: First, their vocabulary was limited. In particular, they were not good at using English collocations, idioms, or expressions. Second, some students found writing styles in English completely different from their mother tongue (Vietnamese), so they often made mistakes in writing English paragraphs and essays. Third, the majority of students agreed that the writing topics should be more interesting and inspiring, and finally, most of the students wanted to improve their writing skills because of its importance in improving their communication skills. Most of the students agreed that they often used mobile phones inside and outside of class, but few of them used mobile phones for improving their writing skills (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Students' Attitudes Toward English Writing Skills and Their Learning Difficulties

No.	Responses	A	B	C	D	E
1	Among the four English language skills, I like writing the most.	2	5	3	56	14
2	I have problems with writing in English because my vocabulary is limited.	37	23	4	10	6
3	I often make grammatical mistakes when I write in English.	35	24	0	7	14
4	I am not good at English collocations, idioms, and expressions.	42	21	5	7	5
5	I seldom pay attention to writing styles when writing in English.	31	24	2	10	13
6	I prefer to learn English writing skills with interesting and inspiring topics.	24	32	4	8	12
8	I find writing skills very important for language learners.	35	20	5	11	9
9	I agree that mobile pedagogy (laptops, tablets, mobile phones…) can help us learn a language better (English).	32	25	4	7	5
10	I often use mobile phone in class and out of class (at home, at work, at cafés, restaurants, etc.).	40	25	0	9	6
11	I never use mobile phones for learning English writing skills.	43	21	2	11	13

After conducting the experiment with students by using mobile phones in our writing class, we determined that they had made significant progress through reading their writing reflections. Table 2 indicates that most of the students were interested in using the text messaging features because they achieved some useful knowledge on writing skills from websites. In particular, they were able to broaden their vocabulary and grammar knowledge when keeping blogs, diaries, or portfolios. Since they could share their ideas and opinions with their friends and teachers, they felt it was easier to deal with different topics in different writing styles (e.g., narratives, instructions, and reports). These topics were familiar to their daily life, which considerably inspired and motivated their learning of English writing skills. Due to the effectiveness and benefits of using mobile phones, they also expressed a desire in developing other language skills such as reading, listening, and speaking with mobile phones in the future. However, some students

occasionally spent too much time on the Internet, which affected their quality of learning.

TABLE 2. Students' Reflections After Using Mobile Phones in Learning English Writing Skills

No.	Responses	A	B	C	D	E
1	I am interested in learning how to write in English with text message features on mobile phones.	35	24	4	10	7
2	I have obtained some useful information on learning English writing skills with Internet sources and websites via mobile phones.	24	35	3	12	6
3	I can review and improve my vocabulary and grammatical structures after using mobile phones in English writing class during some weeks.	27	30	2	13	8
4	I found out that my writing skills became better due to my texting practice on mobile phones (creating more blogs, diaries, and portfolios).	32	28	3	7	10
5	I can share my opinions and ideas of different writing topics with my friends and teacher.	31	24	2	13	10
6	I often receive comments and feedback on my writing from our teacher.	34	28	4	7	7
7	I am satisfied with the mobile pedagogy application in English writing class.	42	20	3	6	9
8	I think I will use mobile phones to improve other language skills such as listening, reading, and speaking.	41	25	4	4	6
9	I sometimes spend too much time surfing the Internet on mobile phones.	37	23	4	10	6
10	I am occasionally too dependent on my mobile phone. I find it hard to write in English without it.	24	35	5	9	7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There is no doubt that there is a great impact from using mobile phones in teaching English to Vietnamese students since mobile phones have become the most indispensable and successful means of communication. In particular, the application of the text messaging feature of mobile phones into teaching English writing skills in our experiment has been effective in improving the quality of students'

language learning. However, we still face open questions concerning texting: What are the influences of using mobile phones on students' learning? Are students too dependent on mobile phones in their study? Furthermore, in spite of some limitations on the number of participants and questionnaires, a further study will be conducted with a larger number of students in the teaching of other language skills such as listening, reading, and speaking. Hence, this will increase the validity of results with respect to mobile pedagogy application to teaching a foreign language.

Like Vietnamese, millions of Korean people spend much time, effort, and money learning English, but why can't most of them speak and write in English as well as expected? The deep-rooted and firmly embedded problems result from teaching and learning methods. Therefore, this study aims to offer some suggestions to enhance English learning and teaching methods, such as improving English communicative skills, particularly writing skills for not only Vietnamese but also other Asian learners.

Based on the results obtained in this study, we suggest some implications on using mobile pedagogy in teaching and learning English for Asian students in general and, in particular, Vietnamese students, teachers, and institutions in the Asian region such as Korea.

For Students

First, due to the great impact of mobile phone use on their English learning, Asian students should take advantage of the various potentials of this advanced electronic device to enhance their language self-study capacity. They are able to learn English anywhere and anytime, provided that they bring a mobile phone with them. To improve their vocabulary and grammatical structures in English, which is one of the most difficult things they have to deal with in learning English writing skills, they can create a list of words on various topics relevant to their daily activities, such as sports, music, food, and clothes, and then use them as much as possible. In addition, they can use the function of message texting to make up stories, create blogs, and keep a diary with their English writings regarding their concerns, questions, and outcomes from their study. In other words, students are always encouraged to use mobile phones outside the classroom to write in English as much as possible so that their writing skills will be significantly developed.

However, students need to avoid being too dependent on mobile phones in their study. Due to the available resources on the Internet, which can be accessed anytime and anywhere, students tend to plagiarize in completing their English writing tasks at school with a mobile phone. Hence, students should become more active in their critical thinking and avoid plagiarism in learning English writing skills.

For Teachers

To adapt to the advanced technology teaching environment, teachers need to improve their qualifications by training themselves to be skillful in using electronic device applications in their teaching. This means that teachers should be able to professionally use these devices, including mobile phones, iPads, and laptops. Teachers should work hard to design attractive lessons using mobile phones in teaching different English language skills, especially writing with text messaging features, as we have shown in this study. Furthermore, teachers in Asian countries such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan ought to understand well the impact of cultural and social factors on learning English in non-native English-speaking nations so that they are able to create appropriate teaching methods.

In addition, teachers should encourage students to use mobile phones in their language self-study, which can help them improve all English skills effectively. However, teachers ought to set up measures that discourage students from plagiarizing in their writing tasks, for example, by giving lowest scores or punishments to those who break learning rules during classes.

For Institutions

Due to the benefits of using mobile phones in learning and teaching English, schools or institutions should equip the teaching facilities with a high quality Internet network. As a result, both teachers and learners can easily access the Internet to obtain the useful resources of teaching and learning English. Since some students in need cannot afford to buy smartphones, schools should support them with some funds so that all the students can use this electronic device in learning English. Moreover, institutions should organize some training workshops for teachers to help

them update their knowledge of applying advanced technology devices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are some limitations in this study since the use of mobile phones can be applied in teaching and learning all English language skills, not only writing skills. As a result, it is necessary to have further studies on using mobile phones to improve other language skills such as speaking, listening, and reading. Furthermore, the number of participants in this study was rather limited (80 students). Thus, we should have more participants in future studies.

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