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Teachers' Perceptions on Using Smartphones in Teaching English as a Foreign Language Context

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers at a foundation year in a university in Saudi Arabia. Forty-one (27 males and 14 females) teachers completed a survey using Google Forms. The results indicated that the majority of teachers (83%) supported the integration of smartphones in EFL context, in which 71% believed that smartphones would enhance students' EFL learning. 72% reported that they used smartphones for university-related work: sending and receiving emails, accessing the internet, and using educational applications were the most reported beneficial features whereas scanning/creating QR codes, using calculator, playing games, and playing a podcast were the least reported.79 % believed that smartphones would have instructional benefits for learners such as access to technology, motivation, creativity, English language learning opportunities, and variation in instruction, whereas 58 % did not notice any barriers in the use of smartphones in EFL context. That smartphones might distract students' attention was the only reported barrier. Recommendations and implications for further research and applications were suggested.

Key words: *English as a foreign language, foundation year, perceptions, Saudi Arabia, smartphones*

Introduction

Mobile phones' capabilities are being improved in education day by day. Regardless of place and time, their features and applications have made them useful to improve the process of learning. Research on the use of mobile phones for learning purposes revealed a gradually increasing use among learners (Johnson & Radhakrishnan, 2017; Ng, Hassan, Nor, & Malek, 2017). In order for this technology to succeed in education, it needs to be investigated in the light of the three main pillars of education: students, teachers, and curricula. This study examines the teachers' perceptions about integration and use of smartphones in perceiving English as a foreign language.

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Previous research revealed that teachers are still not in favour of or reluctant to adopt this technology in the classroom because of little adequate training of using mobile phones (Ozdamli & Uzunboylu, 2015), knowledge (Şad & Goktas, 2014), beliefs about negative consequences (Kafyulilo, 2014), and fears of inappropriate use (Kafyulilo, 2014; Thomas, O'Bannon, & Britt, 2014). The number of users of smartphones and internet is increasing very fast and students use them for study purposes both in and outside the classroom in Saudi Arabia. (Al-Fahad, 2009; Al-Said, 2015; Hazaea & Alzubi, 2016). However, there is still ambiguity about how teachers perceive these tools in the classroom because there was not enough research done on teachers' perceptions towards using this technology in language learning. Therefore, it is very important to understand the teachers' perceptions on using smartphones in EFL classroom before integrating any new learning methods or tools in order to have an inclusive picture about EFL teachers' perceptions on using smartphones in connection with support, features, benefits, and barriers among pre-university students in a different cultural context (e.g. Saudi Arabia).

Review of Literature

Smartphone Integration in EFL Context

The plenty of features that smartphones have in the absence of time and place restrictions have made them unavoidable and undeniable in education. According to Kukulska-Hulme (2016), the importance of mobile technology is perceived to have three features: constant and immediate help, inclusive education (help learners overcome any barriers that hinder their potential), and various uses of technology without any prior request. These kinds of help can be offered in formal settings in educational institutions such as university, school, college, and kindergartens and in informal learning settings such as home, entertainment, or at work (Jaldemark, 2018). Looking like glasses that make seeing better, Lyddon (2016, p. 304) argues that the importance of smartphones resides in assisting learners to 'observe and recall things better, fill gaps in our knowledge, and enhance our ability to communicate.' With smartphones can deliver learning potentials where EFL learners can learn in authentic situations, and self-regulation modes (Persson & Nouri, 2018). In learning through mobiles, learners can claim power over their learning where they can interact with people, collaborate for feedback, and monitor and evaluate their learning on their own shall improve social interaction, autonomy, and motivation and have less time in formal learning settings (Azar & Nasiri, 2014; Kim & Kwon, 2012).

Previous research revealed that mobile phones have the ability to help provide collaboration (Joseph & Uther, 2009), to reduce anxiety (Rahimi&Yadollahi, 2011), to access and engage with learning materials (Pegrum, 2014), to enhance communication (Lyddon, 2016), to provide didactic conversation (Miglani &Awadhiya (2017), to give input or feedback (Zulkafly, Shariman, & Zainuddin, 2011), and to take charge of their learning (Alzubi, Kaur, & Hazaea, 2019; Hoffmann, 2017; Rubin, 2018).

Benefits of Using Smartphones in Education

The promising features and potentials of smartphone in learning require that teachers accept and appreciate these technological tools and use them to vary their teaching methods. Teachers' perceptions on mobile phones' integration in teaching and learning has been reviewed. In Malaysia, Zulkafly et al. (2011) claimed that teachers are not conservative mobile phones adaptation in learning and are very keen to employ new methods in teaching. The teachers reported that mobile phones could be used to take attendance, to write and send announcements, and to set schedules. In Turkey, Ozdamli and Uzunboylu (2015) concluded that teachers were in favour of using mobile phones in learning, but had insufficient level of training adequacy in mobile learning. Oz (2015), another Turkish scholar, revealed that teachers had high levels of perceptions towards the use of mobile phones in language learning and these perceptions were affected by gender and GPA. In India, O'Bannon, Waters, Lubke, Cady, and Rearden (2017) reported that most teachers who participated in the study supported the use of mobile phones in the classroom. The teachers used mobile phones for a number of tasks that included e-mail, text messages, internet, reading texts, videos, calendar, and clock/alarm/timer features. In five commonwealth countries, Miglan and Awadyhiya (2017) revealed that teachers in open and distance learning modes expressed their positive perceptions towards mobile learning as they believed in mobile phones' potentials in enhancing the learners' engagement. In New Zealand, Aldrich (2017) found out that teachers perceived mobile phones as powerful educational tools and worthy of implementation to access knowledge and enhance learning in the classroom.

Barriers of Using Smartphones in Education

Teachers do not always favour the use of mobile phones in learning. In America, for example, Thomas et al. (2014) revealed that teachers were not in favour of allowing students to use mobile phones in the classroom due to a number of issues relating to cheating, accessing to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and disruption. Perhaps, the little support of teachers to students to use mobile phones in the classroom and for school related work can be justified by the fear and little trust in students as they might not be mature enough to control and use mobile phones for learning purposes in addition to the barriers above. Serin (2012) found out that Turkish teachers had inaccurate information about mobile integration in learning and believed that mobile learning would decrease effective communication environment in the classroom. Şad and Goktaş (2014) found out that preservice teachers mostly had little positive perceptions about the potentials of mobile phones as learning tools. In Tanzania, it was found out that although mobile phones were mostly used in schools and colleges and their use in teaching and learning was the lowest due to teachers' little knowledge about employing these tools for learning purposes, also due to their beliefs on the negative consequences that may result from using mobile phones. Furthermore, teachers reported that flirting, little attention, immoral acts (e.g., watching pornographic videos) (Kafyulilo, 2014) can stand as barriers of mobile phone integration in learning.

In the light of review of literature, this study examined the teachers' perceptions towards using smartphones in EFL context in a different cultural context, i.e., Saudi Arabia, and for the reason that very little research was conducted about the topic. This study hopes to verify the previous findings and provide suggestions and recommendations for further applications about the use of the most spread technological tools (smartphones) for learning purposes. Thus, this study examines the following research question in order to present a complete picture about the teachers' perceptions on using smartphones in different cultural contexts: How do teachers' perceive the use of smartphones among pre-university students in EFL context in Saudi Arabia?

Method

Population and Sample of the Study

The study targeted all EFL teachers (56) at a foundation year programme in a university in the southern region of Saudi Arabia. Thirty-seven male and fourteen female teachers in level one and two comprised the sample of the study. Foundation year is a programme of two semesters with the

main aim of preparing high school students for the university specialised study. Four skills are taught by the foundation year programme: English skills, computer skills, math skills, and communication skills. The following table (Table 1) shows the participants' particulars involved in the study:

Table 1
Qualities of Participants

Category	Details
Field of study	English language teaching, applied linguistics, linguistics, translation.
English language	Foreign, second or first language
Arabic language	Foreign or first language
Age	20-65
Gender	Both (male & female)
Nationality	Multinational (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, India, Pakistan, Sudan, Yamen, Egypt, Britain)

Data Collection

In this quantitative research, the data were collected through a survey about the teachers' perceptions towards using smartphones in EFL context.

Survey

An adapted survey of forty-six items by Thomas et al. (2014) was administered through Google Forms to collect data to provide answers for the research questions. The survey consisted of demographic information (6 items) (gender, age, teaching experience, teaching level, courses, smartphone expertise), teachers' support for the use of smartphones in EFL context (2 items), beneficial smartphone features (18 items), instructional benefits to using smartphones in EFL context (11 items), and instructional barriers to using smartphones in EFL context (9 items).

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through features by Google Forms in form of percentages and finding means and standard deviation by excel programming. Validity of the survey was evaluated by four experts in the field of computer/mobile-assisted language learning. Suggestions and comments related the clarity of some items were considered. Then, the survey was piloted, and the Cronbach

alpha value was .78. It is noted that due to the imbalance in the number of male and female participants of the study, the differences based on gender were not analysed.

Findings

How do teachers' perceive the use of smartphones among pre-university students in EFL context in Saudi Arabia?

Demography

Table 2 depicts the demographic data of the teachers who agreed to participate in the study. It is shown that teachers who completed and submitted the survey were 41 (73 %) out of 56 participants: 27 (66 %) male, 14 (34%) female teachers. Participants' ages range from 20-30 (4 participants: 8.9 %), 31-40 (17 participants: 41.5 %), 41-50 (15 participants: 36.5 %), and 51-above (5 participants: 12.2%). The teaching experience years had the following percentages: 1-5 (11 participants: 26.8 %); 6-10 (10 participants: 24.4 %); 11-15 (6 participants: 14.6%); 16-20 (5 participants: 12.2 %); and 21-above (9 participants: 21.9 %). As for the teaching level, the participants expressed that 60 % (25) teach both levels (one and two), 31.7 % (13) teach only level one, and 7.3 % (3) teach only level two. In addition, reading skills are taught by 17 participants (41.5 %), writing skills by 13 participants (31.7 %), listening and speaking skills by 19 participants (46.3), and grammar by 15 participants (36.4%). With regard to level two, Technical Writing is taught by 19 participants (46.3%) and General English by 17 participants (41.5%). Finally, data analysis of smartphone expertise showed that 32 participants (78 %) of the teachers have a very good expertise with the use of smartphones (M=3.92, SD= 0.909).

Table 2
Demography

N.	Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Standard Deviation
	Gender	Male	27	66%	
		Female	14	34%	
	Age	20-30	4	8.9%	
		31-40	17	41.5%	
		41-50	15	36.5%	
		51-above	5	12.2%	

	Teaching experience	1-5	11	26.8%	
		6-10	10	24.4%	
		11-15	6	14.6%	
		16-20	5	12.2%	
		21-above	9	21.9%	
	Teaching level	Level one	13	31.7%	
		Level two	3	7.3%	
		Both levels	25	60%	
	Courses	Reading skills	17	41.5%	
		Writing skills	13	31.7%	
		Listening & speaking skills	19	46.3%	
		Technical writing	19	46.3%	
		General English	17	41.5%	
1	How do you rate your expertise with smartphones?		3.92		0.909

Teachers' Support for the Use of Smartphones in EFL Context

As per the table below (Table 3), the figures depict that 34 (83%) of the participants support the use of smartphones in EFL context (M=3.96, SD=0.802) and 29 (71%) think that smartphones support students' EFL learning (M=3.85, SD=0.802).

Table 3

Teachers' Support for the Use of Smartphones in EFL Context

N.	Item	Means	Standard Deviation
2	I support the use of smartphones in EFL context.	3.96	0.802
3	I think that smartphones support students' EFL learning.	3.85	0.917

Use of Smartphone Features

Table 4 shows that 72 % of the participants reported that smartphones are of very good benefit in EFL context (M=3.60, SD=0.700). Sending and receiving emails (M=4, SD=0.802), accessing the internet, and (M= 4.14, SD=0.582) and using educational apps (M=4.07, SD=0.655) were the most reported beneficial features. The least reported benefit of smartphone features were scanning/creating QR codes (M=3.59, SD=0.700), using calculator (M=3.62, SD=0.757), playing games (M=3.65, SD=1.106), and playing a podcast (M=3.63, SD=0.798).

Table 4
Teachers' Use of Smartphone Features for University Related Work

N.	Item	Means	Standard Deviation
4	Sending and receiving text messages through smartphones are useful in EFL context.	3.96	0.793
5	Sending and receiving emails through smartphones are useful in EFL context.	3	0.802
6	Sending and receiving tweets through smartphones are useful in EFL context.	3.74	0.883
7	Accessing the internet through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	4.14	0.582
8	Taking photos through smartphone is useful in EFL context.	3.70	0.854
9	Posting pictures online through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.70	0.857
10	Recording audio/video through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.92	0.740
11	Watching videos through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.96	0.833
12	Playing music through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.74	1.038
13	Playing a podcast through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.62	0.798
14	Playing games through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.66	1.106
15	Using clock/alarm/timer in smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.74	0.962
16	Using calendar in smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.74	0.784
17	Using calculator in smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.63	0.757
18	Social networking through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.88	0.659
19	Downloading apps on smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.88	0.793
20	Using educational apps through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	4.07	0.655
21	Scanning/creating QR codes through smartphones is useful in EFL context.	3.59	0.700
Total		3.81	0.165

Instructional Benefits to Using Smartphones in EFL Context

Table 5 displays teachers' perceptions on the instructional benefits in the use of smartphones in EFL context. 79 % of the participants agreed that smartphones have instructional benefits in EFL context (M=3.94, SD=0.140). They strongly agreed that smartphones increase access to technology (M=4.03, SD=0.538), increase students' motivation (M=4, SD= 0.762), facilitate students' creativity (M=4.03, SD= 0.705), provide English language learning opportunities regardless of place and time (M=4.18, SD=0.682), and provide opportunities for variation in instruction (M=4, SD=0.604) in EFL context. That smartphones increase digital fluency was reported the least instructional benefit towards using smartphones in EFL context (M=3.70, SD=0.781).

Table 5
Instructional Benefits to Using Smartphones in EFL Context

N.	Item	Means	Standard Deviation
22	Smartphones increase access to technology in EFL context.	4.03	0.538
23	Smartphones increase students' engagement in EFL context.	3.77	0.789
24	Smartphones increase student's motivation in EFL context.	4	0.762
25	Smartphones facilitate students' creativity in EFL context.	4.03	0.705
26	Smartphones increase students' productivity in EFL context.	3.77	0.797
27	Smartphones decrease digital divide for students with no computer at home.	3.96	0.643
28	Smartphones increase students' collaboration in EFL context.	3.92	0.576
29	Smartphones increase students' communication in EFL context.	3.89	0.758
30	Smartphones increase digital fluency.	3.70	0.781
31	Smartphones provide English language learning opportunities regardless of place and time.	4.18	0.682
32	Smartphones provide opportunities for variation in instruction.	4	0.604
Total		3.94	0.140

Instructional Barriers to Using Smartphones in EFL Context

As shown in the following table (Table 6), 59 % of the participants did not perceive any barriers in the use of smartphones in EFL context (M=2.89, SD=1.011). One of the barriers is that 39% agreed that smartphones may distract students' attention (M=3.33, SD=1.106). However, 53.7% were not of the opinion that smartphones are a waste of time (M=2.48, SD= 1.003), and 41% did not consider smartphones as a barrier in cheating (M=2.81, SD=0.813), 46.3% in accessing learning apps (M=2.85, SD=0.803), 36.6 % in disrupting learning (M=2.74, SD=0.975).

Table 6
Instructional Barriers to Using Smartphones in EFL Context

N.	Item	Means	Standard Deviation
33	Smartphones are a barrier to students' EFL learning in accessing to apps.	2.85	0.803
34	Smartphones are a barrier to students' EFL learning in cheating.	2.81	0.803
35	Smartphones are a barrier to students' EFL learning in cyber bullying.	3	0.715
36	Smartphones have a negative impact on students' writing.	3	0.997
37	Smartphones are a barrier to students' EFL learning in harassment.	2.88	0.643
38	Smartphones distract students' attention.	3.33	1.106

39	Smartphones are a barrier to students' EFL learning in accessing inappropriate content on the internet.	2.96	1.048
40	Smartphones disrupt students' EFL learning.	2.74	0.975
41	Smartphones are a waste of time.	2.48	1.003
Total		2.89	1.011

Discussion

It has been found that teachers' perceptions towards the use of smartphones in EFL context are positive. This tendency is based on their use of smartphones for university related work, the promising features of smartphones, the absence of time and place, and the belief in their capability in enhancing students' English language learning. To put in a nutshell, the most of EFL teachers who participated in the study supported the integration of smartphones in EFL context because they believe that smartphones would enhance students' EFL learning. Despite the little number of teachers in O'Bannon et al.'s (2017) study, the majority of the teachers supported the use of mobile phones in the classroom owing to the fact that smartphones would support students' learning. Unlike Thomas et al. (2014), 39 % of the teachers had seen a supportive role in using mobile phones in the classroom.

It was also found that the majority of the teachers use smartphone features in EFL context. Sending and receiving emails, accessing the internet, and using educational apps were the most reported beneficial features. The least reported smartphone features were scanning/creating QR codes, using calculator, playing games, and playing a podcast. Like Thomas et al. (2014), 60 % of the teachers reported that they used mobiles for schoolwork. Except for accessing the internet, Thomas et al. (2014) and O'Bannon et al. (2017) reported that calendar, clock alarm/timer as the most used whereas sending and receiving emails, scanning/creating QR codes and playing a podcast were the least. The various findings can be justified by the new rapid advancements in revolution of smartphones which have made all applications available on smartphones regardless of time and place.

In addition, the participants reported that smartphones increase access to technology and students' motivation, facilitate students' creativity, provide English language learning opportunities regardless of place and time, and provide opportunities for variation in instruction in EFL context.

This finding goes in line with O'Bannon et al. (2017) except for the statement that smartphones increase digital fluency which was reported the least in this study.

Furthermore, the teachers expressed their concern about the use of smartphones in EFL context with regard to distracting students' attention. This finding does not correspond with O'Bannon et al. (2017) who reported that teachers view accessing to inappropriate content on the Internet as the primary barrier. Thomas et al. (2014) reported the teachers' concerns on the learners' use of mobiles to cheat, access inappropriate content, cyberbully, and create classroom disruptions, and a lack of student access and on students' writing. The integration of smartphones in learning is on the increase and their practicality is being improved day by day. This may justify the variance in some findings.

Conclusion

Smartphones are being proved day by day as valuable learning tools amid the absence of time and place restrictions. This study aimed to identify the teachers' perceptions towards using smartphones in EFL teaching and learning context at the university level in Saudi Arabia. The findings indicated that teachers have positive perceptions about smartphone integration in EFL context due to the useful features such as sending and receiving emails, accessing the internet, and using educational apps; and instructional benefits for students that include access to technology, motivation, creativity, and opportunities for variation in instruction. As for barriers in using smartphones in the classroom, teachers were only worried that smartphones would distract students' attention. Due to the imbalance in the numbers of male and female teachers, no comparisons were made based on gender differences. These findings imply a call for stakeholders to support the integration of these tools in the triangular processes of teaching and learning methods, curricula, and students. They are also invited to furnish the floor for experimental studies that investigate the applicability of various smartphone features in EFL context.

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