Reading News through Mobile and Its Effect on Essay Writing- A Case Study on Upper-Intermediate Iranian EFL Learners

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Original Research Article

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Abstract: Taking the position that writing can be an important skill to foster knowledge building pedagogy; this article explores reading news through mobile applications as a supportive tool for this purpose. Fifteen language learners as participants of the experimental group used two popular news applications on their mobile phones for reading as a pre-task activity that made them outperform their counterparts in the control group in terms of using facts in essays. No significant difference, however, was observed in the overall writing ability of two groups despite considerable progress of the variable content in the experimental group's favor.

Keywords: content, facts and opinions, mobile media, writing skill

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that writing is the most challenging language skill for most of ESL/EFL learners and mastering it requires a considerable amount of time and effort. Writing is an extremely complex cognitive ability in which the writer is required to control a number of variables simultaneously. At micro level, these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. At macro level, the writer needs to integrate information into cohesive and coherent text [1].To become a skillful writer is the main goal of many language learners, especially those who want to continue their education in academic settings. White and Arndt [2] states that "through writing, we are able to share ideas, arouse feeling, persuade and convince other people, we are able to discover and articulate ideas in a way that only writing makes them possible" (p.1).

The term of skill is defined as ability. Concisely, writing ability is the skill to express idea, though, and feeling to other in writing symbol to make other people or readers understand the idea conveyed. Writing is a very complex process in which numerous cognitive and metacognitive activities take place, for instance, brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, revising, and so on. Cognitive aspects have received particular attention, as investigators have attempted to understand the thought processes underlying the compositions of students [3].

Learning to write is difficult especially for those writing in a second or foreign language in academic contexts. As Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] stated by putting together concepts and solving problems, the writer engages in "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text"(128). There is a sufficient body of research that confirms the positive effect of concept mapping in the students' writing tasks in academic contexts. Smith [5] found concept mapping a worthwhile heuristic for helping experts make their own understanding more evident to learners and for helping learners better understand the structure of knowledge. The process of drawing a map not only demands active involvement of the learner in the learning process but also sheds light on their understanding of a specific learning area.

According to White and Arndt [2], writing is an important experience which enables us to spread the knowledge by sharing our thoughts and ideas; stimulate feelings; persuade and discourage others; and make changes. Writing has a large impact on our social and cultural acts and it should not be considered as a product. In fact, writing is the ultimate form of self-expression. It is the key to unlock the mind's potentials. However, in the writing of EFL learners this cognitive-linguistic aspect of writing is ignored [6]. It is crucially important to encourage learners to put their thoughts into writing and write more effectively. Sasaki [7]

highlights the role of instruction in improvement of writing ability. He claims that learners become more critical writers when they are taught to be so.

Writing is a very complicated process in which numerous activities take place, for instance, planning, drafting, revising and so on [8]. To Hadley [9], "writing is not merely writing things down_ even in one's native language_ if so, teaching writing would be an easy task" (p.2). Expressing ideas or simply communicating for that matter, in writing can be slow and difficult, especially for learners.

In terms of the distinction between knowledge telling and knowledge transforming, Bereiter and Scardamalia [4] argue that it may be said that writing instruction generally attempts to foster development from the former to the latter by guiding students toward more sophisticated work within the rhetorical space, promoting composition planning, audience awareness, better use of syntactic and semantic resources, and so on. The knowledge-building approach, by shifting the focus to the content space, reflects a different logic: Improve the ideas by exploiting the dialogic potential of writing and "the production and continual improvement of ideas of value to a community" [10].

Mobile assisted language learning has indeed made an appearance within the field of ELT, first around 2009 with the appearance of mobile applications for language learning developed by the British Council. MALL describes an approach to language learning that is assisted or enhanced through the use of a handheld mobile device [11]. Several studies have examined the use of the Short Message System (SMS) in vocabulary learning [12-14]. Other studies have also shown that MALL is not just limited to vocabulary learning. In one study Lys [15] suggested that mobile devices helped the learners to increase oral language proficiency over only nine weeks. All thing considered, however, this study aimed to analyze the extent to which using mobile media can help Iranian EFL learners improve their writing ability in terms of content.

METHOD
Do students who read through mobile media use significantly more facts in their essays than those who read in a normal way?

Q2. Is there any significant difference between the writing achievement of those students who read through mobile media and that of those who read normally?

PARTICIPANTS
The study was conducted with 30 Iranian upper intermediate university students being selected from Khatam ol-Anbia University in Tehran, Iran. In order to make sure of homogeneity, participants were selected out of a pool of 65 based on their results in a PET test, which is a standard exam of Cambridge University. Having calculated the mean and the SD, the participants with the score of 1 SD above and below the mean ($\pm$ 1SD from the mean) were selected for the study. All the participants had already passed 10 courses in the same institute, apart from that, none had any other experience of studying English. After selection of the participants the steps below were taken:

- Thirty students with the same level of proficiency were selected based on their scores in PET exam (randomization).
- The selected participants were randomly divided into two classes of equal number (random assignment). Therefore, control group consisted of 15 participants as well as experimental group.

INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments were used for the present study
- Preliminary English Test (PET) which is a standardized Cambridge test, so reliability of the test is not needed to be tested.
- A writing composition test used to determine the ability of the learners in writing. The participants were asked to write an argumentative essay. Performances were scored as to ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wromuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey [3] which takes into account the communicative effect that the written text produces in the reader.

PROCEDURE
As the course, where participants participated in the present study, was a general English course, Communicative Language Teaching method had to be used in both classes for the non- treatment half owing to the institute standards and American File course books series.

At the beginning of the study, both groups were given the writing pre-test in order to compare their scores. It was an argumentative essay on the following topic: Do you think reporters should be sent to dangerous zones?

In the control group, the learners received a normal routine instruction as they always do, whereas in experimental group in each session for 20 minutes they were treated with focused practice on use of mobile media as follows:

Following pre-testing, the students participated in six forty-minute study sessions. In every experimental study, the subjects may differ with regard to previously-learned skills which may affect the

results. So, the pre-assessment of the skill was necessary. The results of this pre-test were also considered as their writing ability indicator. The rater gave a score to each composition using analytic marking. The students in experimental group received the instruction for using different mobile applications to get data for their writing. For each session, they read news on specific global issues, recently broadcast, which was accompanied by videos and photos. Two main applications in this regard were YAHOO News Digest and Google Newsstand. Key information was asked to be summarized by them for home writing. However, the control group was given highly ranked model essays to be highlighted for key information. It is worthy of note that the details of fact, namely evidence or findings, incidence, axiom, and principles, were not taught to the participants of the experimental group. To elaborate, evidence refers to research findings or documents; incidence is germane to events; axiom is related to accepted conventions; principle, as its name suggests refers to theories and universally accepted beliefs.

The first two sessions were devoted to training the technique. The other six sessions were spent practicing the strategy for the students to master the fundamental skills. Two essays were composed every week as homework for a total of twelve essays for each student. During these sessions, other formal teaching techniques were not employed by the teacher. During the instructional period, the students in the control group wrote as many expository essays as the experimental group but without the use of mobile phones. Simply put, for each session the experimental group read two news texts associated with a single subject on their mobile phones and used its data summary written in the class for writing assignment at home. On the other hand, the control group read two model essays on a single topic, summarized their information for writing homework which was to be submitted in the following session.

By the end of the study which took almost 2 months that was 30 hours of input, the students' writing ability was tested again through administration of a post-test (a parallel version of pre-test).

To assure the reliability of the scores, two experienced composition instructors, the supervisor of the thesis and his colleague at Idea Language Academy, rated pretest papers in such a way that no rater read the pre- and post-test of the same participant. The average of the two scores was considered as the final score.

The difference between the pre- and post-test of each participant was considered as the amount of improvement. To determine if there is a significant improvement from the pre to the post test essay, an independent samples t-test was performed between the post test scores of experimental and control group.

RESULTS

Apart from main analyses, an inter-rater reliability analysis regarding the two sets of scores was done through Spearman Rank-order correlation coefficient was carried out to find out if there was a high consistency between the two raters' scores (See Table4.1).

Table-1: Inter-rater Reliability

Raters	Mean	Variance	Rs
Rater 1	71.2	46.24	.93
Rater 2	71.4	57.76	

As to Table 2, the two tailed sig of the test above is "0.894" which is much higher that assumed p value which is "0.05", so it can be inferred that there was no significant difference between the groups before treatment.

Table-2: Pretest Results of Overall Writing Ability

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	upper
Writing pretest	Equal variances assumed	.257	.616	.00	28	0.894	.00067	2.54917	-5.45826	5.49159

In order to compare control and experimental group firstly the pre-test scores were analyzed. A MANOVA test seemed to be applicable to analyze the presentation of multiplate variables in two groups' writing. Table 3 below shows the results of a multivariate analysis. Based on the results retrieved, components of facts were not significantly different.

Table-3: Multivariate Analysis Results

Factor	F Statistics	Sig.
incidence	5.500	0.078
findings	2.200	0.232
Axiom	38.301	0.453
Principles	7.615	0.411
Multivariate	11.204	0.190

As it can be seen in table 4 the mean score obtained from experimental group which received efficient mobile assisted treatment was far higher than the mean of control group with placebo.

Table-4: Group statistics of the post test scores of experimental and control group

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing score Posttest	Experimental	15	79.64	9.024	2.43644
	Control	15	69.400	10.035	2.52068

It can be inferred that there was not a significant difference between the groups inasmuch as the amount of sig two tailed is "0.96" which was significantly higher than the predetermined amount of p value which 0.05 (See Table 5).

Table-5: Posttest Results of Overall Writing Ability

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
Writing posttest		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower	upper	
	Equal variances assumed	.28	.965	-1.75	28	0.01	-1.6333	3.5794	-16.325	-2.5431	

It can be concluded that treatment was not effective for overall writing ability. The learners who used mobile media could not write better essays. However, the experimental group could use facts, as the main concern of the study, use of facts, is germane to content of writing, than the control group. The analysis of posttest scores for facts used in the essay was done through MANOVA, as table 6 shows.

Table-6: Analysis of post-test Scores for Facts and Opinion

Factor	F Statistics	Sig.
incidence	70754	0.011
findings	11.000	0.003
Axiom	11.489	0.063
Principles	6.612	.28
Multivariate	7.840	0.001

Based on the results obtained, it can be seen that the post score of the groups were significantly different except in terms of axioms and principles. And the mean score of experimental group was bigger than that of control group.

However, once inspected one by one independently, all variables except content proved unchanged in the essays of the experimental group. As table 4.10 shows, content significantly improved to mean score 23.5 from 18.4 (Sig.>0.05).

Table-7: Multivariate Extension of Hoteling's T-Square

Variables	Mean		T2	Sig.
	Pre	post		
Content	18.4	23.5	8.12	.001
Organization	13.2	13.5	1.81	.061
Vocabulary	13.3	13.2	.93	.092
Language use	18.8	17.7	.67	.234
Mechanics	4.4	4.2	.13	.583

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the effect of using mobile media on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. The results indicated that mobile phones can be used as effective factors in the teaching-learning process. It was observed that the EFL learners, in the experimental group used a good range of facts and opinion in their posttests, especially the ones who were more technology friendly. They used their mobile phones as frequently as required in the most effective ways. It may be concluded that the EFL teachers should feel responsible enough for the effective learning of the EFL learners to take place and help their students to use their mobile devices more effectively. Mobile phones can be used in order to help learners build knowledge and use it in their language production. Weigle [16] notes that this pedagogic thinking only fosters knowledge telling and acts as an obstacle to transforming the writing knowledge; therefore, there is an urgent need of having a rethink of writing programs and calling for expertise on designing writing courses as a solution to foster the knowledge of topics, discourse, and genre. Also, teacher training program should be enriched with inclusion of discourse management courses to reflect social concerns of writing. Crosslly, Muldner, and McNamara [17] note that writers can employ various methods to retrieve and develop new ideas in their writing .These important endeavors can be prompted by reading the assignment and translating the received ideas into text. Idea generation appears as an integral element of writing that is almost considered by cognitive models of this language skill [18]. Despite receiving scant attention compared with other cognitive processes in writing, developing new ideas can contribute to writing success [19, 18]. Crosslly, Muldner, and McNamara [20] assert that idea generation leads to higher quality texts in students' writing. This important part of writing is interpreted in terms of fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality. Fluency refers to the number of ideas but flexibility is accounted when ideas are different. Expansion and novelty of ideas are estimated through elaboration and originality respectively, as they clearly suggest. There are few studies in MALL which involves writing skills. Alsaleem [21] applied electronic journaling in order to improve writing skills of 30 EFL undergraduate female students in Languages and Translation College at AlImam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia. They were asked to give reflective comments to their peer's work with an application called WhatsApp. This quasi-experimental study revealed that learners showed a good reaction to the discussions and they seem to enjoy their dialogue journaling. The pre-test and post-test also indicated that learners has a significant improvement regarding vocabulary and opinion (ideas). This study have indirectly used the Study Skills and Socialization Model where students form a small group support to give feedbacks on each other's weaknesses and immerse themselves into the academic culture by constantly correcting their own work.

Another study was conducted by Shree, , Parilah,, Nor, Rosseni, Rashidah, and Juhaida, [22] to see if prospective teachers who were passing teaching training courses from 27 teacher training institutes in Malaysia are ready to use mobile learning to improve their argumentative writing. This genre is very much similar to academic writing because it helps learners to become critical and reflective thinkers. The research mentioned a few problems faced by the respondents when writing an argumentative text like weak content, weak vocabulary, and weak organization. Jai Shree *et al.* [22] also mentioned that learners found it difficult to relate to their ideas in writing because they focus more on the product than the process of writing. They were also unable to grasp the study skills needed as they had less group-based activities. The study recommended that Argumentative writing skills can be developed through mobile learning as it helps learners to use it anywhere and anytime. This helps students to get more collaborative learning without worrying about place and time to improve their writing skills. Lee and Kim [23] also used a mobile based learning tool to improve

writing skills of Korean students who are considered as EFL learners. The tools used are to check for grammatical mistakes and students think it is effective in improving their grammar at sentence level. This is like the Product Approach which can be used via mobile.

As another study in line with this study which ended with the inadequate use of mobile phones in the teaching-learning process, Berge [15], carried out a research to examine the role of mobile dictionaries in teaching English vocabulary. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the students found it difficult to use their mobile phones to check the meaning of the words. They rarely used them. However, in that study the participants were all over 35 years old. Clearly age is an important factor and younger people are more mobile-friendly. However, in another study the results were completely contradictory. In this study by Byrd [24], the effect of using mobile phones on writing improvement of learners was investigated. It was revealed that learners really enjoyed finding the information they need in pre-writing stage through their mobile phones.

CONCLUSION

This study was aimed to teach the participants that writing can be used as a device to express meaning. During the course of treatment, participants in the experimental group were encouraged to use their smart phones to look for the information online and find ideas to use in their writing tasks. When comparing the number of facts and opinion used in the posttest of the groups it was found that the participants in experimental group were able to express facts and opinions more frequently. The findings obtained in this study may lead to a number of implications. First and foremost, the findings consolidate the role of mobile phones as an effective tool in the teaching EFL writing. Second, the current study is another step taken towards the optimal use of technology in the classroom and may motivate the EFL/ESL teachers to exploit MALL more efficiently in the classroom environments. Third, the result

Obtained from the current study is aimed at EFL learners. As with the use of mobile phones and the internet they will be more independent and can find ways to study English more autonomously.

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