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TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING WITH SMARTPHONES: A CASE STUDY IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Integration of technology in task-based language teaching (TBLT) has long been a source of attraction for language teachers (Pierson, 2015). In the case of developing countries, such as Pakistan, mobile phones are the modern form of technology commonly available at low cost to individuals as well as institutions. The present descriptive case study explores the impact of ubiquitous smartphones and a TBLT approach on students' and teachers' perception and motivation in improving English writing skills. A mixed method approach was used to explore the qualitative and quantitative data. Smartphones were used to complete writing tasks on blogs. The results of the study reveal that using smartphones, combined with a TBLT approach, created learning environments which promote self-confidence and interaction with the teacher and peers. It also helped the teacher in providing individual feedback to the students, improving students' engagement in learning tasks as well as self-expression in English.

Keywords

Task-based language teaching; smartphones; English writing skills; blogs

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), a process-oriented approach, has appealed to language teachers for many years (Misred & Mohamed, 2014; Nunan, 2004; Pierson, 2015; Richard, 2006). TBLT encourages the meaningful use of the target language through communicative tasks (Pierson, 2015). This can pose well-known challenges to the language teacher (Lai & Li, 2011), such as how to ensure the authenticity of the tasks and so generate genuine meaning-based communication in the classroom, how to overcome students' passive learning styles, and how to address students' avoidance of the target language in classroom-based communicative activities (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2007; Littlewood, 2007; Mustafa, 2010; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). It has been argued that the integration of technology may help address these challenges (Lai & Li 2011; Ortega, 2009; Warshauer, 2001). In Pakistan, which is the context of this paper, and in other developing countries, the mobile phone industry has flourished over the last few years, due to huge private investments and low purchase costs (Winthrop & Smith, 2012). By 2015, around 90 percent of the population in Pakistan was covered by a mobile network with an annual cellular teledensity of 76.46 percent; that is almost 140 million mobile subscribers (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2015). However, this rapid expansion of mobile technologies has not yet found its way into language teaching. English is largely still taught as a literature-based subject in Pakistan, with a focus on form rather than communicative competence. It has been argued that because of this, students lag behind in their functional usage of English, although they possess knowledge about the language (Ahmed & Bidin, 2016). Indeed, in 2010, the British Council placed Pakistan among the least developed of developing countries in the field of English language teaching (Coleman, 2010).

In this paper we report a case study carried out in Pakistan which introduced TBLT methods to 11 students of English using smartphone technology and an innovative blogging task (see below). The objective was to harness students' motivation for using mobile technologies and redirect it towards their language learning. A number of studies have shown that the use of mobile phones in language learning provides teachers and learners with significant educational benefits, such as low cost, convenience, learner friendliness, ease of access, and ubiquitous interactivity (see, for example, El-Hussein, & Cronje, 2010; Hockly, 2013; Kukulska-Humle & Shield, 2008; Martin & Ertzberger,

2013; Stockwell, 2010). Kim (2013) carried out an empirical study to explore the impact of mobile apps on Korean tertiary students' English listening skills. Smartphone apps were used to practise listening skills for 30 minutes twice a week by the experimental group, whereas the control group did not use these apps. Listening tests at the end of the study showed significant improvement in the listening skills of the experimental group. In another study, Jarvis (2014) explored L2 users' perceptions about smartphones in second language use at tertiary level in Thailand. He found that about 48 percent of the respondents agreed that smartphones are important in learning English language and had smartphones as their preferred devices. However, no research has been done to explore the impact of use of smart mobile phones in English language learning and teaching in Pakistan.

The research question underpinning the case study reported here is: How do smartphones and a TBLT approach impact the perceptions and motivation of tertiary students and teachers working on English writing skills in Pakistan?

Methodology

The case study described here was carried out in a public university in the Punjab province of Pakistan. The Head of the English department was contacted via email and was briefed about the study. He was also asked to forward the participant information sheets and invitation to participate to first-year undergraduate students and their English teacher. Eleven students volunteered to participate. The case study was carried out over five weeks in the first semester. The research involved an initial demographic questionnaire, a five-week blog task run by the class teacher with the support of training videos for students made in Urdu by the first author, a post-task questionnaire for students and a semi-structured debrief interview with the teacher.

The blog task

The blog task was run over five weeks, and the target was for each student to set up a personal blog and to write at least three blog posts in English. These blogs were set to be open access, so anyone anywhere could read and respond to the students, leading to a potential authentic readership and interaction.

Week 1: None of the participants had ever read or written a blog previously. Training in how to set up a personal blog was provided in two sessions in the first week of the study through online video tutorials and a step-by-step guide. Ongoing support from their English teacher in the class was also available to the students.

During the first training session, students were shown how to set up a personal blog. After watching the video and reading the step-by-step guide, students were expected to set up their personal blogs and post the link to their blogs in the comment section of a class blog. The second training session taught the participants how to publish posts on their personal blogs using their smartphones. After this initial training, the students were given training and instructions for the three posts which were to be written both in and out of the classroom.

Week 2: During the second week, blog writing techniques, such as how to choose a title for the blog, how to write the first paragraph, and training about writing style, were explained, and a list of topics was given to the class. Students used their smartphones to find information about one of the topics. The next day students worked in groups, discussing ideas and opinions before completing the writing task as an email to their instructor. Feedback was provided to them on their writing task. This was followed by the first blog post task where participants were asked to choose one of five statements and write 150 or more words on it in their personal blogs.

Week 3: During the third week, descriptive essays were discussed in the class. Students then worked in groups describing and discussing pictures. Later, they wrote their own descriptive essays and emailed them to their instructor who gave them feedback by replying to their email. At the end of the week, a similar blog task was posted which was to be completed individually.

Week 4 & 5: In the fourth and fifth weeks, students had to take a photograph with their smartphones and write a descriptive essay about it on their personal blogs. They were allowed to publish as many

posts as they wished. Students were also encouraged to read their peers' blogs and provide feedback on their posts. At the end of the fifth week the students were invited to participate in an online survey based on their experience of using smartphones and blogs for improving English writing skills.

Data collection tools

Demographic questionnaire

The purpose of the demographic questionnaire was to collect background information related to students' use of smartphones, self-evaluation of their own English proficiency level and number of years spent in learning English. The questionnaire consisted of seven items and was administered at the beginning of the study.

Post-task survey

An online survey with 5-point Likert scales explored the perceptions of students in using smartphones for learning English writing. The survey consisted of 31 items which were clustered around three main themes: ease of use, impact of using smartphones and blogs on motivation, and English writing skills.

Interview

A semi-structured interview was carried out to investigate teacher's perceptions about use of smartphones in TBLT classrooms. The interview questions were focused on exploring the benefits and drawbacks of using smartphones for improving English writing skills in Pakistani TBLT classrooms and possible challenges to be faced by language teachers. This interview was carried out through Skype and took around 25 minutes to complete.

Results and Discussion

Students' experience

First, we explore students' experiences of using their smartphones for these tasks. The results of the survey demonstrated that most of the students were highly positive: they strongly agreed with the ease of using smartphones as well as the ease with which they learned and completed the tasks, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1:   Ease of use.

These results are supported by the findings of other research studies that examined students' use of mobile phones for learning. Chen, Hsieh, and Kinshuk (2008) also showed that students enjoyed using their phones due to ease of access and ease of use offered by these devices. Attewell (2005) claimed that mobile phones helped tertiary level learners in the United Kingdom remain connected with their learning materials for a longer period of time, which eventually helped them raise their self-confidence and improve active involvement in language learning. Mueller, Wood, De Pasquale, and

Archer (2011) found that students utilised hand-held mobile technology for learning in and out of the classroom both at elementary and higher education settings in Canada. Similar results were noted in this study. Students were engaged with their learning tasks both inside and outside of the classroom; they published blog posts at the end of the week in their free time outside the classroom, after having practised English writing skills for each task during class-time. The minimum number of blog posts expected from students was three. However, eight out of eleven students posted more than three posts on their blogs, which demonstrates their practise in class and involvement in writing skills outside the classroom. Table 1 shows students' engagement in their writing tasks outside the classroom alongside demographic information.

Table 1:   Students' Engagement with Blogging

Participant	Gender	Age	Years studying English	Mother tongue	Previous language of instruction	Number of posts	Average number of words per post
Student 1	Female	19	>12	Siraiki	English	4	211
Student 2	Female	18	5-11	Urdu	English	7	185
Student 3	Female	17	>12	Urdu	English	7	230
Student 4	Female	19	<5	Siraiki	Urdu	5	136
Student 5	Female	18	>12	Urdu	English	4	309
Student 6	Male	18	5-11	Siraiki	Urdu	6	195
Student 7	Female	18	<5	Siraiki	English	4	438
Student 8	Female	20	>12	Urdu	English	5	239
Student 9	Male	19	5-11	Siraiki	English	3	166
Student 10	Female	19	5-11	Siraiki	English	3	239
Student 11	Male	17	5-11	Urdu	English	3	333

Nine students in the study claimed increased motivation when learning English writing skills with the help of smartphones. The results of the questionnaire revealed that they were not only putting in more time in planning and revising their writing tasks but were also paying more attention to word choice, spelling, grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure (Figure 2).
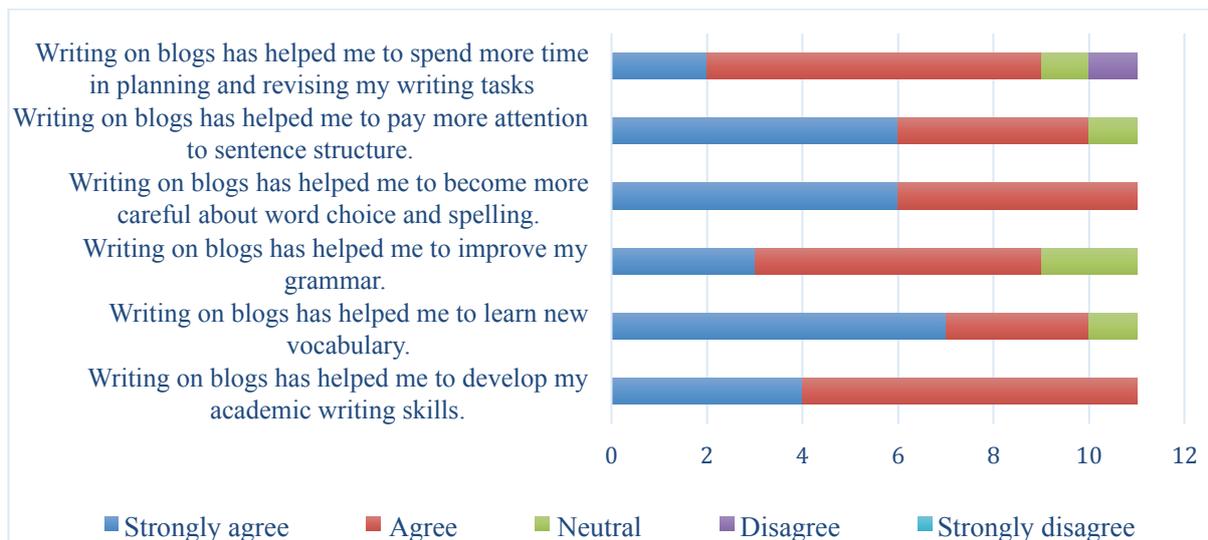
Figure 2: **Students' perceptions about effect of blogging on English writing skills.**

All this effort was eventually perceived by the students as leading to an improvement in their academic writing skills. Again, this supports other results in the literature. Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) and Thornton and Houser (2005), for example, discuss the positive effect of using mobile technology in class on students' motivation to learn English, and Lin, et al. (2006) found that using blog technology had a positive impact on students' interactivity.

Teacher's experience

The teacher was invited to share her experience of using smartphones for task-based teaching of English writing skills in a semi-structured interview. The interview was about perceived advantages and disadvantages of using smartphones in TBLT and a thematic analysis was carried out of the transcribed interview. We report the key results here.

Valk, Rashid and Elder (2010) suggested that mobile phones were more productive tools in developing countries for advancing education as compared to other forms of ICT. A similar point of view was offered by the teacher: "Using smartphones provides an alternative to a lot of digital instruments necessary for a language classroom".

Valk et al. (2010) also mentioned in their study that using mobile phones not only improved access to education but also facilitated new learning. The motivational factor, increased interaction, the appeal factor coming from the use of new technology, affordability, immediate application of lessons learnt in the classroom, discussion and shared problem solving were some of the benefits observed. In the present study, among other benefits of using smartphones in TBLT, the course tutor particularly emphasised time management and providing individual feedback:

> It saved my time and gave me the chance to check their work on the spot. I could highlight and explain the errors they made in writing. It allowed me to have a conversation with them and dig deep into their needs and problems that they faced related to writing.

Bellarman (2014) claimed that use of mobile phones in classrooms was highly motivating for learners. Fageeh (2011) also found that using blogs for teaching writing skills encouraged students' self-expression in English. In the present study, where both smartphones and blogs were used, the teacher's perception of the impact on students' motivation, engagement level and confidence was very evident:

> Students felt independent, self-driven and confident. They engaged very actively in the discussion groups prior to writing tasks. They channelled their discussion to so many streams which turned out to be useful and instructive. They found catharsis in writing on

their own and enjoyed writing about things related to themselves and sharing them with others.

After a couple of weeks, they started coming up with new ideas and developed better ways to present their written work.

Previous research also supports this finding and shows that blogging can improve students' interest, motivation and writing skills (Fageeh, 2011; Richardson, 2006).

The teacher also pointed out some drawbacks of using smartphones, specifically unreliable Internet and lack of experience using smartphones for education:

While working with smartphones in TBLT, it gets difficult to make the students stay committed to the task. They perceived smartphone as a device made for keeping in contact with others and for entertainment. So, I had to push them, usually send them reminders and work through reward and punishment even at university level to get the tasks done. Students also faced problems such as not having reliable Internet facility which made the time management a critical issue while completing a task in the class.

Mueller et al. (2011) argued that different mobile technologies could work differently in given circumstances; hence instructors could play an important role in bringing forth the true potential of these technologies for learners to enhance self-regulated learning. The teacher, in the present study, mentioned that use of smartphones should be tried in other subjects as well. She mentioned that smartphones can prove very beneficial in teaching English writing skills and she will keep on experimenting with both technology and TBLT.

Conclusion

The findings of the study confirm that a combination of smartphones and a TBLT approach can have a positive impact on students' motivation and engagement with the learning process. Smartphones in the classroom, with the targeted guidance of the teacher, can create learning environments which promote self-confidence and interaction with the teacher and peers. Blogs can take this interaction one step further and make it possible to interact with a global audience. This is particularly important for a developing country like Pakistan, where the mobile technologies are readily available but have not yet filtered into language teaching in any considerable way. We suggest that harnessing students' motivation for using mobile technologies and putting them to use in the language teaching classroom will be an important step in addressing the perceived lag in their English communicative competence.

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