

Blogging with smartphones for independent writing practice beyond the EFL classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a university in Pakistan experienced blogging on their smartphones as a means to gain more extensive autonomous practice writing in English. The blogging was done as a stand-alone activity, independent of the students' university EFL programme. Using a mixed-methods case study design, data were collected from 23 undergraduate students through interviews, surveys, and reflective written accounts. This paper foregrounded the students' voices to reveal their attitudes to blogging, their experiences using smartphones for that purpose, and perceived changes in their English writing skills. The findings indicated that many of the participants developed a virtuous cycle, in which their interest and enjoyment of blogging, along with perceived improvements in their ability to communicate in English, contributed to increase both confidence and motivation to write more. The findings also pointed to other worthwhile social and educational outcomes that could be fostered through this type of activity. As a result, the study has implications for teachers and learners in a wide range of EFL contexts, i.e., offering further insights into strategies for harnessing existing digital tools in order to extend students' opportunities to use the target language, within and beyond formal educational settings.

Keywords: Blogging; EFL; extensive writing; MALL; out-of-class learning; smartphones

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INTRODUCTION

Learning beyond the confines of classroom time and place is no longer a new concept. In relation to English, specifically, it has gained increasing prominence over the past two decades as a component of successful language learning (see, for example, Benson & Reinders, 2011; Nunan & Richards, 2015). Diezmas et al. (2016), Housen (2012), and Inayati (2015) are amongst scores of other researchers from diverse countries and contexts who have similarly drawn attention to positive effects of beyond-the-classroom learning, particularly in relation to the benefits of extended periods of exposure and increased opportunities to practice English language skills.

Out-of-class learning can include teacher-directed activities, as well as varying degrees of independent and self-initiated study. With reference to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, Inayati (2015) defines the latter as "any student effort outside the classroom to improve the student's English skills, without specific instructions or assignments from a teacher" (p. 47). This includes students finding opportunities to extend their periods of practicing English language, as well as engaging with authentic materials and activities, both of which can augment classroom instruction and mitigate time and resourcing issues that are often encountered in EFL programs.

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However, in many contexts, face-to-face exposure to English language outside the classroom is limited, and students can find it challenging to locate materials and activities which they enjoy, and which align with their proficiency level. Training to assist students to make astute decisions about their choice of activities is also scarce, which can further limit opportunities for them to develop habits and attitudes that support successful independent study. Additionally, although increased internet accessibility globally now enables more opportunities than ever before for students to access target languages beyond the classroom, learners have tended to focus on platforms that are predominantly receptive in nature (e.g., watching movies, reading comics, and listening to music), more than those that have more communicative potential (e.g., online oral and written chat sites) (Aydin & Ekşi, 2013; Lai et al., 2018; Steel & Levy, 2013).

Findings such as these have stimulated educators and researchers to explore how digital tools and applications can be further harnessed for extensive beyond-the-classroom practice of productive language skills (writing and speaking), and, arguably more importantly, to explore the attitudes and perceptions of students in relation to these potential affordances. This paper reports on a study conducted with Pakistani university students who used smartphones for blogging to practice writing in English beyond (and separate to) their university English course.

Blog Posting for Language Learning

In an early and seminal work on blogging for language learning, Godwin-Jones (2003) drew particular attention to the interactive nature of blogs, and the potential impact of readership beyond just the learners' classmates on the learners' ownership and responsibility for their language development, and thus on learner autonomy. Godwin-Jones also highlighted the suitability of blogs as journals and electronic portfolios that can record and demonstrate students' progress over given periods of time. Subsequent studies that have explored blogging for English language learning have reported additional potential advantages, such as individual and collaborative knowledge construction, sharing information *in English* beyond classroom settings, and being able to provide and receive feedback with fewer pace, place and time constraints (e.g., Özdemir & Aydin, 2015; Sampath & Zalipour, 2010; Vurdien, 2013; Zarei & Al-Shboul, 2013).

In addition to the flexibility blogs can afford in relation to time and space, Sampath and Zalipour (2010) observed that blogs can make the revision process easier for students, and learners can find the feedback and review stages less face-threatening compared to traditional pen and paper methods. Zarei and Al-Shboul (2013) similarly reported that

Jordanian learners perceived blogs to be a useful platform for peer feedback during an intensive post-graduate preparation course, as well as being an opportunity to improve their English skills through sharing their experiences, knowledge and thoughts beyond the confines of the classroom.

Learners in Zarei and Al-Shboul's (2013) study further reported that the use of blogs motivated them to participate more in other activities during their language classes. This aligns with findings reported more recently in a study conducted by Alsubaie and Madini (2018). Although the study's primary focus was on using blogs as a supplementary tool to enhance university students' writing skills and vocabulary retention, Alsubaie and Madini also reported an increase in the learners' motivation levels. Improvements in motivation or self-efficacy have also been reported in relation to blogging as part of EFL programs in other contexts, including Turkey (Arslan & Şahin Kizil, 2010), Spain (Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010), and Japan (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010).

Further studies which have focused specifically on the impact of blogs on learners' writing skills have also reported positive effects in relation to the structure and content of students' written work. Farooq et al. (2015), for example, examined the impact of a six-month program in which Pakistani undergraduate students used blogging as a medium to write, and to receive instruction and guidance. The researchers reported significant improvements in language structure, sequencing of ideas, and creativity in the students' written output, and concluded that blogging appears to "provide an opportunity for learners to shift from surface to deeper levels of learning" (p. 113).

Although the findings of these studies point to a range of potential positive outcomes for English language learners using blogs, research in this area to date has focused predominantly on the effect of using blogs for writing within - or as a required adjunct to - an existing English language program. In most instances, even where the programs have included blogging as a vehicle to foster autonomous learning practices, the students' blogging has been done with teacher direction and supervision within classrooms, or beyond the physical walls of the classroom but with teacher-directed tasks that form part of their in-class program or course requirements. The study reported in this paper differs in this regard, in that the students' blogging was done specifically as a means to increase their out-of-class writing in English, and was not a part of their university English language course.

Why Smartphones?

In the majority of reports on studies that have explored blogging for developing English writing skills, the mode of access to the internet (and therefore to blog sites) is not identified. However, in

many instances, it can be deduced that the learners have accessed blogs (their own and others') by means of a desktop or laptop computer. In the study described in this article, the participants' access to the internet, as well as the means by which they could do this, were important considerations, due to issues including geographical location, sociocultural factors, and pedagogical practices that have been widely reported to limit access to digital engagement in many contexts (see for example, Cook et al., 2011; Syafryadin et al., 2022; Winthrop & Smith, 2012).

The use of computers as a tool for education has been further constrained by hardware affordability in many developing countries. Pakistan, where the current study is situated, is no exception in this respect, although the situation there differs markedly between public schools and private institutions. The majority of Pakistani public schools deliver Urdu-medium education, and cater for rural and semi-rural areas and lower-income families. For students attending these schools, the use of computers for educational purposes has relied largely on whether or not they have personal access to them at home (Salam et al., 2017). In comparison, the English-medium private schools, which are predominantly attended by middle and upper class families, are mostly well equipped with computers, and have the associated infrastructure required to support digitally enhanced teaching and learning (Dogar et al., 2015; Siddiqui & Gorard, 2017), thereby potentially reinforcing the digital divide.

In contrast to the imbalance in ownership of and access to computers, ownership of smartphones has increased rapidly across all socioeconomic groups in Pakistan in recent years (Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, 2018). Researchers in other countries have argued that capitalizing on the educational affordances of mobile technologies may provide a means of 'leapfrogging' the digital divide (Lee et al., 2015; Mascheroni & Olafsson, 2015; Puspitasari & Ishii, 2016). Godwin-Jones (2017) has gone further, claiming that "smartphones as life partners" are "a potential game-changer in education" (pp. 3-4). Indeed, benefits of utilizing smartphones, particularly for teaching and learning English, have now been reported across a broad range of countries, contexts and sectors (e.g., Alhadia, 2020; Chen & Denoyelles, 2013; Hossain, 2018; Leis et al., 2015; Mindog, 2016; Oz, 2015).

Although the use of mobile phones by tertiary students in Pakistan has been explored previously, the primary focus of most studies has been on levels of ownership and patterns of usage (e.g., Ahmed & Qazi, 2011; Ally et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2018). To date, much less research attention has been given to the potential use of smartphones for writing in English in Pakistan and other EFL contexts. With the biggest group of internet users in Pakistan being 20 to 24-year-old

tertiary level students (United Nations e-Government Knowledge Database, 2017), the decision to use smartphones as the device for blogging in the current study capitalized on their ubiquitous nature and eliminated the potential digital divide associated with computer access. Additionally, by blogging with smartphones, the participants were able to take advantage of the flexible time, place and pace affordances of the smartphone as a mobile device, with greater independence and a less formal setting to practice writing in English.

METHOD

As Lai et al. (2018) have reported, digital devices of all kinds can be used differently depending on users' individual needs and goals. In relation to their use for educational purposes, understanding learners' attitudes and perceptions about the usefulness of particular devices and applications for specific learning-oriented purposes can help teachers and learners in their choice of task and device, along with realistic goal setting. Further, this information can provide insights into students' difficulties, and inform efforts to guide students in their language learning endeavours. The focus of this paper is on learners' experiences with, and attitudes towards blogging with smartphones. Specifically, the study explored the following research question: How do tertiary EFL students perceive smartphones and blogging as tools to practice writing in English beyond the classroom?

Participants

The participants were all enrolled in a Molecular Biology and Biotechnology qualification at Bahauddin Zakariya University, a public university in Pakistan. All students in this department were required to study English as part of their program, with a focus on grammar, writing, and presentation skills. With permission from the department head, information sheets were distributed electronically to the students, none of whom were known to the authors prior to the study. Informed consent was received from 23 students who were all in their first semester of university study.

The results of a background information survey conducted prior to the blogging component of the study established that all of the 23 participants spoke Urdu or an Urdu dialect; none had English as their first language. However, the majority (17) had studied English for twelve or more years prior to their university studies; three had studied English for between five and eleven years, and three for less than five years. Their self-reported proficiency in English was high-beginner to intermediate level. All of the participants had access to a smartphone and were using them for a range of purposes, including accessing educational content (16), entertainment

(14), emailing (14), and making phone calls (12). Overall, the participants' smartphone use was relatively recent, with just over half having used a smartphone for less than one year (12). None of the students had prior experience with using blogs prior at the outset of the study.

Data Collection

The study utilized a mixed-methods case study approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Yin, 2014), drawing on quantitative data gathered from pre- and post-study surveys, in addition to qualitative data from surveys, individual semi-structured interviews, and written reflective accounts. Burns (2000) confirms the strength of case study methodology for this type of exploration, and points to the value of multiple methods and data sources for triangulation.

As reported above, the participants were surveyed at the outset of the study in order to collect background information. These surveys were completed individually by the participants via an online tool. After preliminary compilation, coding and analysis of the survey data, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 23 participants. This enabled opportunities for participants to clarify and expand on their survey responses, and for further information to be gathered, including prior experiences (if any) with blogging, any previous use of smartphones for English language learning, and their perceptions about using smartphones and blogs to practice English language skills.

Since the background survey and interviews revealed that none of the students had prior experience of smartphone blogging, it was important to provide them with training in the technical aspects of using smartphones for this purpose. In order to give an initial immersive experience in a blog environment, the training itself was conducted via a blog. The first phase included short videos in Urdu, with supporting pictorial guides in English on the technical aspects of setting up a personal blog using a smartphone. Further training was provided on how to publish posts on the participants' own blogs, how to access others' posts, and how to access other features on their smartphones to augment and enhance their blogs. The last phase of the training involved activities on how to choose a topic for a blogpost, how to comment on fellow students' blogposts, and how to review their own blogposts. The use of a host-blog to familiarize the participants with these aspects provided them with purposeful hands-on opportunities to experience reading and following a blog before they developed their own (see Rashid et al., 2020, for a detailed account of the learner-training model).

At the end of the study, the participants posted their feedback about their experiences onto the host blog. They also completed a follow-up survey about

their perceptions of using smartphones for blogging as a medium to practice English language writing. The survey further explored the students' beliefs, preferences and enjoyment of using blogs for this purpose, as well as their perceptions regarding the ease of using smartphones for blogging, perceived improvement in English writing skills, perceived improvement in communication skills, and perceived increases in motivation and confidence. Further data were then gathered from eight participants' who agreed to undertake post-study semi-structured interviews.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the surveys, interviews and written reflections were investigated using an iterative thematic analysis process (Miles et al., 2014) throughout the study. Reference to the quantitative pre- and post-study survey data also took place at regular intervals during the analysis, to assist with possible interpretations and to gain a fuller understanding of the emerging findings. Extracts from the qualitative data sources are included in the following presentation and discussion of the findings, in order to give voice to the students' experiences and perceptions, and to give deeper insights into the themes that arose.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed here in relation to four major themes: 1) blogging as a fun and motivating activity; 2) using smartphones for blogging; 3) perceived improvement in English writing skills; and 4) community building beyond a formal educational context.

Blogging as a Fun and Motivating Activity

The findings revealed that the novelty of the blogging experience positively impacted the participants' motivation for practicing English writing skills using this tool. Although some students reported they experienced initial difficulties with publishing their posts, many added that even though "it was a new thing" for them, they found blogging "interesting" as it allowed them to share their opinions, ideas, and thoughts with the world. One student described blogging as "an amazing experience". Another summed up the views of many others when she stated: "This was the first time in my life I used the internet for such a purpose. It was a good activity. Such activities can help us learn how to use the internet more productively."

Other motivating aspects of blogging commonly referred to by the participants were "creativity" and "independence", particularly in relation to being able to choose what they wrote about after their initial two practice posts. As one student stated: "This activity gave me a free hand. We can capture family moments, improve writing

skills and share moments with others as well.” Furthermore, the realization they could write independently, and could be read by a broader audience than they had previously, provided further motivation for many of the participants to continue blogging. As one participant stated: “When I received one comment on my post, I really loved knowing that somebody had appreciated my effort. I also learned by reading other posts. It taught me how people differ in their thoughts and opinions from each other. Definitely, it gives me so much motivation.”

Regarding creating titles for their posts, some students reported that they preferred to use their own name for a title so they could make their identity and personality more visible. One student, for example, explained that she had initially called her blog simply “My blog.” However, she then wondered: “How would [anyone] know that it is my blog? So, I added my name in it.” Another student reported: “My blog was based on my name and I thought people should get to know me. They should know what I think and what my attitude is towards others.” Another factor that influenced the participants’ decisions about the title and content of their posts related to their desire to inform others about their individual passions – things such as food, or their love for their city or country. The following comment is typical in this respect: “I wanted to make everyone familiar with my city. I chose the titles for my blogposts, which reflected the beauty of Multan. Through my blogposts, I wanted to urge people to visit Multan.”

Other blogpost themes included memories, as well as objects or events that were readily available for the participants. For many of the female students, who were more likely than the males to stay at home after their university classes, this meant that the topics and themes often related more closely to their immediate surroundings. One of the female students explained: “We usually don’t go out for recreation, so I did not have much to choose from. This is why I used to pick objects from my home.” Another reported that she sought input from siblings and friends for possible topics.

In addition to using their blogs to share their observations and opinions with a larger audience, some students referred to using their blogs for personal relief and renewal. One student, for example, stated: “I use my blog as catharsis.” Another student explained: “Even during papers, I would think about my [blog] topics before going to bed and would write my post as a break and relaxation from studies.” Some students also reported that they found it helpful to be able to share their opinions on a range of social issues. One stated, for example: “I wanted to do something for my society, so I used my blog [to write] about things that could be done.”

When asked about the frequency of their posts, many participants indicated that the ease with which they could make their posts was a key factor. One student reported: “Gradually [blogging] captured my interest because the things were getting easy.” The following comment is illustrative of many others in this respect: “When I started writing on my blog, gradually it became a hobby. I realized that [blogging] was very easy and interesting.”

A sense of challenge was also reported as a motivating factor that impacted the number and length of some students’ blogposts. Indeed, 18 of the 23 participants reported that even though the blogging was not connected to their university English course, knowing their peers were also blogging contributed to their sense of competition and this contributed to their motivation to write more in English. One student explained it this way: “When I had to do it as a competition, it was very intriguing for me. It was fascinating for me, as I was publishing posts on my own choice.”

Most students also reported that they found blogging to be a fun activity. Qualitative comments in regard to this were strongly supported by quantitative data from the follow-up survey (see Figure 1), with most of the students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had enjoyed blogging in their free time.

Almost all of the participants reported that they enjoyed reading other people’s blogs, and the majority also reported they would continue to use their blog in the future. As a tool for writing in English, most of the participants reported that they preferred using blogs instead of the more traditional pen and paper approach.

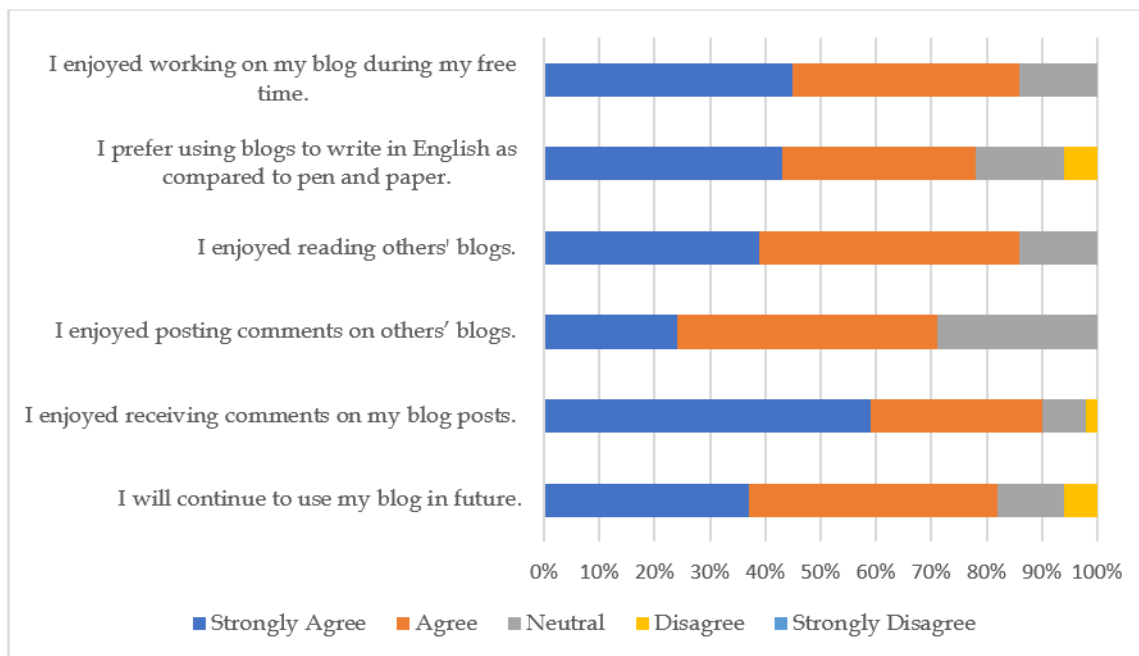
The high proportion of participants in the present study who reported they found blogging fun and motivating is consistent with Akdağ and Özkan’s (2017) research, and aligns with findings that learners’ expectations regarding whether new technologies are easy, useful, or fun, can impact their motivation and willingness to engage in using those technologies. Harju et al. (2016) also found that non-formal learning through blogging can depend on the learners’ own interest and goals. Kim et al. (2014) further found that although these types of activities may be considered as independent and personal pursuits, they are also influenced by the context of learning and social factors. This was indeed the case in the current study, with peer participation reported as impacting motivation and engagement by many of the participants, and factors such as the participants’ gender also influencing aspects of their engagement (e.g., topic choice).

The participants’ reports regarding motivation as a result of being able to express their opinions independently, and the ability to share these with a wider audience via their blogs also aligns with findings from other studies (e.g., Gunduz, 2016; Montero-Fleta & Pérez-Sabater, 2010). With regard

to the students' overall preference for receiving feedback compared with giving feedback (shown in Figure 1), this may be reflective of them being relatively new to blogging, but may also be related to their (lack of) experience and confidence, at least initially, in making responses in this type of forum. A range of other potentially interacting factors may

also be at play here, including the public nature of blog comments, and the participants' confidence in their own English writing skills. These are areas that would benefit from future investigation.

Figure 1
Students' attitudes towards blogging

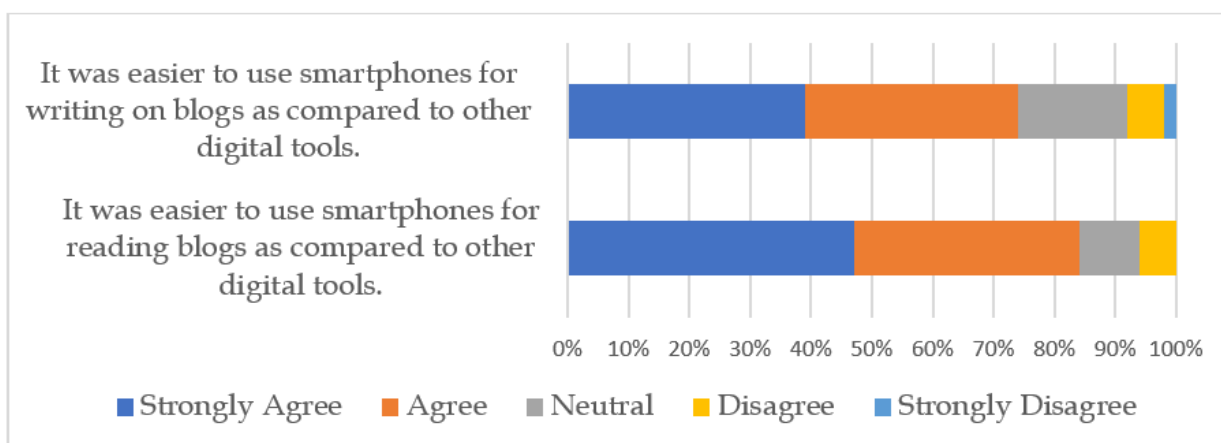


Using Smartphones for Blogging

Initial interviews with the participants revealed that although they had not used their smartphones for learning English prior to this study, they believed it could be helpful. However, despite their interest, many of the students expressed initial uncertainty about how they could use their phones for this purpose. In the follow-up survey, a majority of the participants reported that they not only found

blogging with their smartphones enjoyable, but that they found writing and reading blogs easier with their smartphones than with other digital tools (see Figure 2). A recurring reason given for this related to the relative ease of internet access via data packages the participants used for their smartphones compared to the less reliable internet services they used for computer access.

Figure 2
Students' experiences using smartphones for blogging



The participants gave a range of additional reasons for their preference for using smartphones for blogging. These included increased flexibility with regard to when and where they could write. One student, for example, reported that if she had a problem with internet connectivity, she could more easily move to a better-connected location. The following quotations from the participants' written feedback provide further illustrations of the relative ease of use, efficiency, and flexibility that they reported: "I used to publish [my] blog post on my mobile because it was easy. I could even publish when I was in my bed. Using [my] laptop was more time consuming"; "I used my mobile phone to post on my blog. It was very handy and easy"; "I could use [my smartphone] on the go without worrying about being at a comfortable place to use it and publish a blog post."

The students also described using their smartphones to access the internet for a range of supporting purposes when they were writing their blogs. Goggle was frequently used to translate words from Urdu to English, and also to check the spelling of English words. Almost two thirds of the participants also accessed online dictionaries via their smartphone so they could check the spelling and meaning of words to use in their blogs. One student installed Microsoft Office on his phone in order to use its auto-correct and spell-check features, and another application for ease with word counting. Google was also used by most of the students to search for specific information for some of their blogposts. One student, for example, reported: "... to put in some authentic scientific information, I googled to check the facts and then posted it."

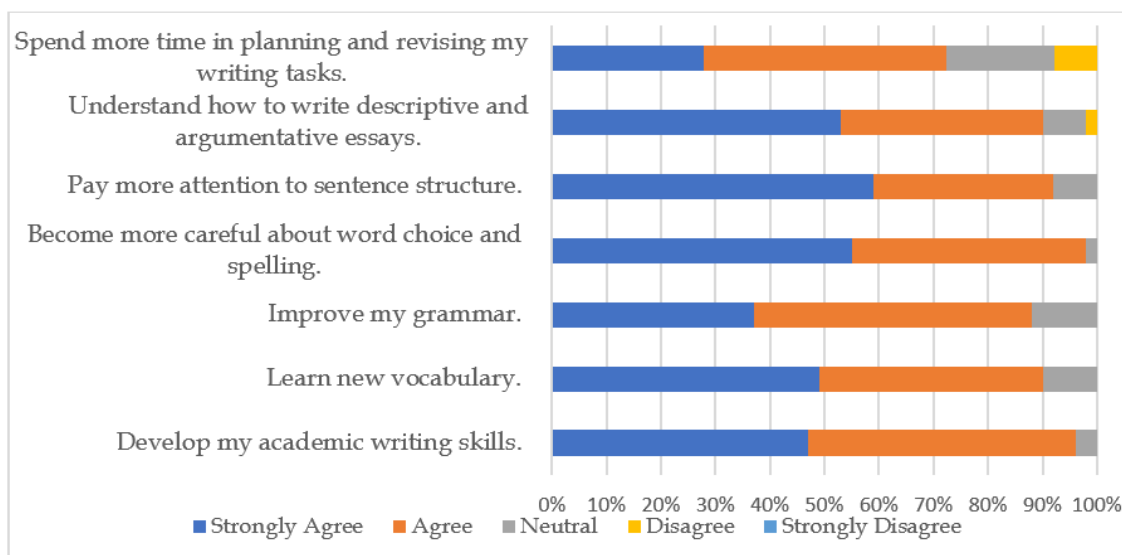
The experiences reported by the students in this study in relation to using their smartphones for

blog writing align with reports from a number of other researchers. In the Indonesian context, for example, Fauzan (2017) reported that students in a university English language program used the internet during blog writing to get help with English grammar, to translate words from their home language to English, and to search for information and ideas. Likewise, as in the current study, other research has confirmed that the convenience, portability, and multitasking possibilities of smartphones, plus the enhanced internet connectivity they offer in some contexts, can impact positively on students' experiences using these devices (Alhadiah, 2020; Anshari et al., 2017; Godwin-Jones, 2017; Hossain, 2018; Leis et al., 2015).

Perceived Improvement in English Writing Skills

Students' beliefs about possible improvements in their English writing skills were explored via the follow-up survey and post-study interview responses, and their written feedback. Almost all the participants believed that the extensive writing practice they had engaged in through blogging had a positive effect on their overall English writing skills, and also enabled them to perform better in examinations and assignments. As shown in Figure 3, most participants reported that, as a result of working on their blogs, they spent more time planning and revising their writing, paid more attention to sentence construction, and took more care with word choice and mechanical aspects such as spelling. Further, the students perceived that practicing writing in English via their blogs improved their grammar and increased their vocabulary.

Figure 3
Students' beliefs about the effect of blogging on specific writing skills and practices



Some participants reported a further motivator for publishing blogposts; namely, when they perceived that, through blogging, their English writing skills were improving, some students reported that they felt more confident, and were stimulated to publish even more blogposts. The following comments reflect the participants' beliefs about their progress, and are illustrative of some of the affective and motivational influences that appear to have stimulated the students to write more: "I realized that I was developing proficient writing skills. I was thrilled"; "It was a two in one thing for me; I developed creative writing and learned a lot while having fun"; "It helped me in creativity and I found it helpful for my language development"; "Now I feel confident that I can publish blog posts. I am sure that after publishing 10-12 posts I will be perfect in writing and publishing posts."

The increased confidence the students in this study reported in relation to their English writing skills aligns with reports from other studies regarding modern technologies enabling greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic engagement in the target language than are available in many classrooms (Richards, 2015;

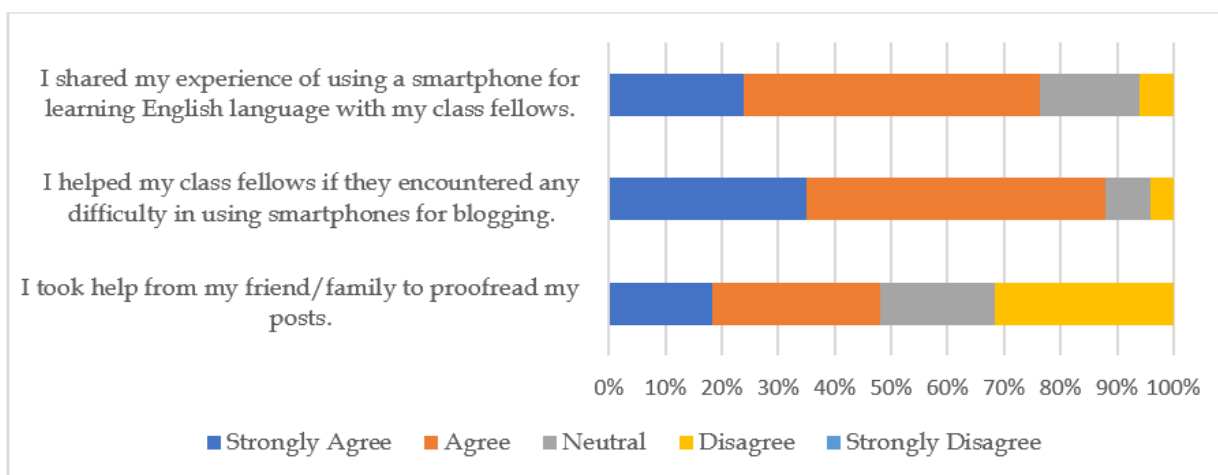
Tolosa et al., 2017), and subsequent impacts on attitudes, confidence and use (Farley et al., 2015).

Community Building Beyond the Classroom

At the outset of this study, the participants were already part of a learning community, by virtue of them all being enrolled in the same university qualification at that point. The findings of this study revealed that despite this research being conducted entirely independently of the students' university programme and EFL class, further community building occurred among the participants, through in-class and out-of-class interactions related to their blogging. Most of the students reported that they shared their experiences of using their smartphone to write in English with their classmates, and most had helped others to solve problems they encountered when using their smartphones for blogging (see Figure 4). Qualitative findings from the post-study interviews and the students' written feedback confirmed that through sharing their experiences and helping each other when challenges arose, the students' developed an effective community of practice, as well as added impetus to write.

Figure 4

Students' practices that contributed to community building



In addition to providing assistance for their classmates, almost half the participants also reported that they had help from friends or family to proofread their blogposts – something that had been neither discouraged nor encouraged by the researchers. In doing so, the students potentially also extended their own personal learning communities by engaging with others beyond their educational setting in ways they had not done previously in relation to their English language learning.

The community building that was reported in this study also extended well beyond what may be viewed as primarily pragmatic or operational functions (such as helping overcome technical

challenges). The students reported valuing opportunities to learn more about each other through their blogs, as well as learning from each other's social experiences. One participant, for example, explained that she did not have any experience of having grandparents, but she was able to learn about the feelings and the experience of living with a grandparent through one of her peer's blogposts.

Findings from this study in relation to the knowledge construction and meaning negotiation that occurred through the students' blogging-related interactions resonate with findings from other studies (e.g., Hourigan & Murray, 2010; Yakut & Aydin, 2017). Deng and Yuen (2011) have similarly

observed social as well as cognitive dimensions in relation to blogging, where the writers engage in a self-reflection process while writing for their blogs, and readers also reflect on and learn from their blogs.

CONCLUSION

The study presented here set out to contribute to our understanding of EFL students' experiences with, and attitudes towards blogging with a smartphone to provide independent practice writing in English beyond the physical and instructional parameters of their formal language classes. There is arguably no one best tool or application to facilitate this type of beyond-the-classroom writing practice. Indeed, the choice of device and platform must inevitably depend on numerous factors, including the students' own perceptions, interest and access. In this study, the high rate of smartphone ownership in Pakistan, and the affordability of data packages to support their use for blogging were important considerations.

Of particular interest as we reflect on the findings, is the potential impact that blogging with smartphones had for the participants, beyond merely the opportunity it provided for them to increase their written output in English. Factors such as autonomy in topic choice, reaching a wider audience, receiving comments on their posts, and perceptions that their English writing and broader communication skills in English were improving, appeared to create a virtuous cycle for many of the students. In addition to providing the conditions for more extensive meaning-focused input and output (see Nation, 2007), the students' informal learning experiences through blogging also motivated them to communicate further, thereby building social and learning communities beyond their formal learning context.

It is only relatively recently that second language learning research has begun to shift attention from negative emotions (mainly anxiety) to the potential role of positive emotions (see, e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). In a recent reference to Fredrickson's (2013) broaden-and-build theory, Boudreau et al. (2018) theorized that "positive emotions broaden the perspective of an individual learner, facilitating engagement with the language, play, and exploration with unfamiliar settings" (p. 152). This was certainly evident in this study. In fact, motivation, engagement, enjoyment, interest, and creativity were recurring refrains in the participants' oral and written feedback.

It is acknowledged that generalizability of the findings of this study are constrained due to it being conducted with just one group of learners, and in one context. Further, the findings are based primarily on self-report data. However, harnessing the affordances of readily available technology, as

described in this article, has potential value in a wide range of other EFL contexts and countries. The use of smartphones, in particular, as a tool for language practice has additional pertinence in light of recent reports of strong and ongoing growth in mobile broadband subscriptions, such that 83 per 100 inhabitants worldwide now have mobile plans, with the greatest increases recorded in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region (International Telecommunication Union, 2021).

This study contributes to existing research in this field in two important ways. Firstly, it provides insights into how tertiary EFL students themselves experienced blogging, and their attitudes towards using smartphones for this type of activity. Secondly, the discussion pays attention to potential benefits that were reported beyond simply the increased opportunities that blog posting afforded for participants to use the target language. In doing so, this study has added to the corpus of research on mobile-assisted EFL learning, and drawn further attention to a number of socio-affective factors that appear to have impacted on (and been impacted by) the participants' attitudes towards blogging, their experiences using smartphones to blog, and their perceptions of changes in their English writing skills.

As Dörnyei (2009) has pointed out, motivation to learn a language comes from "successful engagement with the actual language learning process (e.g., because they discover they are good at it)" (p. 29). Blogging on their smartphones certainly generated that perception for students in this study, increasing their engagement in English beyond their formal language learning environment, and heightening their motivation for further English language practice using these tools.

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