

Students' Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategies in Using Smartphones While Learning the English Language

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Abstract

This study explores the opportunities, challenges, and strategies experienced by university students when using smartphones to learn the English language. The research was conducted with eight English major M.Ed. fourth-semester students from two campuses affiliated with Tribhuvan University and Mid-West University, Nepal. A qualitative method was used, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflection notes. The results showed that students found smartphones useful for flexible learning, quick access to information, and improving their language skills through various apps and online resources. However, they also faced several challenges such as distractions from social media, weak internet connections, small screen sizes, and a lack of motivation for self-study. Students also reported missing teacher support and peer interaction when relying only on smartphones. To address these issues, they developed strategies including setting personal study goals, utilising educational apps, disabling notifications, limiting non-academic use, and integrating smartphone learning with traditional classroom methods. The study suggests that with proper guidance and balanced use, smartphones can be effective tools in learning English.

Keywords: autonomous language learning, distractions and digital interruptions, language learning applications, self-regulated learning strategies, smartphone-assisted English learning

1. Introduction

The growing use of ICT in educational settings has transformed the way students access and engage with learning resources, particularly in the context of English language learning (Kandel, 2025). However, in Nepal, where English is taught as a foreign language,

students often encounter limitations such as insufficient classroom time, minimal exposure to English in their daily environments, and restricted access to quality learning materials. In this regard, in rural parts of Nepal, where educational resources are often limited, smartphones have the potential to bridge gaps in learning. When teachers actively integrate smartphones into classroom activities-by using educational videos, language apps, and online dictionaries-students gradually shift from using their phones primarily for entertainment to using them for focused learning. This transition is important because teacher involvement and structured use of technology can guide students toward productive smartphone-using habits. Smartphones provide students with immediate access to a variety of digital learning resources such as online dictionaries, language learning apps, educational videos, and platforms for peer collaboration. Such resources contribute positively to important language learning areas like vocabulary building, listening comprehension, and overall learner independence.

The diversity of learners representing multiple sociocultural and economic backgrounds of Nepali societies in large and under-resourced classrooms (Kandel, 2014) significantly intensifies the students' cognitive pressure. This cognitive demand is not merely a result of classroom size or resource limitations, but it is deeply intertwined with the sociocultural and economic heterogeneity of the students in the classrooms. Addressing these complexities requires a nuanced understanding of the personal contexts of teachers, students, and classroom environments (Kandel, 2019). Instead of just passively consuming content, effective use of smartphones allows students to engage meaningfully with language learning tasks, which improves their skills more effectively. In this regard, teachers and students, especially in higher education, can enhance their individualized, personal, and collaborative learning (Kandel & Kandel, 2023) by integrating smartphones in educational practices. Smartphones provide flexible opportunities for learners to engage with language content through mobile applications, digital dictionaries, videos, and interactive tools beyond the limits of traditional classroom settings.

Recent studies conducted in Nepal highlight both the advantages and challenges associated with smartphone use in language learning. Tiwari (2022) examined the perspectives of teachers and Master's-Level students on e-learning and found that smartphones promote student autonomy and flexible learning, particularly during periods of limited physical classroom access. However, the study also identified a lack of structured support, which often leads to ineffective learning outcomes. Ghimire (2022) found that secondary-level students benefited from social media and mobile platforms to develop language skills collaboratively, although issues such as poor internet connectivity, unstable electricity, and limited digital access in rural areas continued to hinder learning. Similarly, Shrestha (2023) explored the use of smartphones as ICT tools among college students and reported that while mobile devices enhance academic access and communication, their small screen sizes, frequent digital distractions, and limited capacity for advanced academic tasks pose significant concerns. From a pedagogical standpoint, Pantha (2023) emphasized that smartphones can support learner autonomy by enabling students to revisit recorded lectures, access visual aids, and engage in self-paced learning. However, without proper guidance from educators, such practices risk becoming unstructured and less effective, contributing to techno stress and reduced learning motivation.

To overcome these challenges, students can use various strategies when using smartphones for English learning. These include managing time effectively to limit distractions, selecting specialized educational apps suited to their language level, creating personalized study schedules, and actively seeking peer collaboration through messaging and social media groups. They can also rely on offline resources and download materials in advance to mitigate poor internet connectivity. Educators and institutions play a crucial role by integrating mobile learning into curricula, providing structured guidance, and encouraging

reflective practices to maximize smartphone benefits while minimizing drawbacks. Despite these insights, most existing research has focused on school and undergraduate learners, leaving a gap in understanding how postgraduate students—who require more complex academic and linguistic skills—navigate smartphone-based English learning. This gap became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when students increasingly relied on mobile devices to continue their studies remotely, often without sufficient institutional support. As smartphones continue to influence learning behaviors, it becomes essential to explore how advanced learners in Nepal respond to the opportunities, challenges, and strategies related to smartphone use.

1.2 Literature Review

In recent years, research in Nepal has increasingly focused on how ICT tools and resources are integrated into English language learning. This growing interest highlights a complex story of both opportunities and challenges that come with using ICT for educational purposes (Kandel, 2025). Smartphones have become an essential part of daily life, especially among young learners, and their role in education cannot be ignored. Students can also understand the sociocultural background in which the texts are written and develop intercultural competence (Bist & Kandel, 2024) by exploring the resources instantly using their smartphones. On one hand, smartphones offer many advantages that can help students improve their English skills; on the other hand, several obstacles prevent their full potential from being realized.

A study by Tembe (2021) among bachelor-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Dhankuta found that many learners had a positive attitude towards using smartphones for their English studies. These students appreciated how convenient and motivating it was to use their phones for learning outside of the classroom. However, they also reported some challenges, such as experiencing screen fatigue after long use and struggling with poor internet connectivity. These issues point to the fact that while smartphones offer many benefits, their effectiveness depends on external factors like technology infrastructure.

At the master's level, where students face more complex language tasks, smartphones still play a supportive role. Tiwari (2022) found that smartphones helped these advanced learners access study materials, practice their pronunciation, and develop their reading skills independently. This kind of self-directed learning is valuable, especially when students have limited access to physical libraries or in-person tutoring. Despite these advantages, master's students still struggle with certain aspects of their academic work, particularly writing research papers and comprehending advanced academic texts using smartphones. This reveals that while smartphones can assist with basic and intermediate language skills, they are less effective for supporting the higher-order skills required at graduate levels.

Despite the many advantages that smartphones bring, several important limitations must be addressed. Adhikari (2021) highlighted systemic problems that hinder the effective and sustainable use of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in Nepal. These include weak information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, low levels of digital literacy among students and teachers, and a lack of institutional guidance and support. Without reliable internet access and proper training, the benefits of smartphones cannot be fully achieved. Many schools do not have the technical resources or policies in place to encourage or manage mobile learning effectively.

Another concern involves the distractions smartphones can cause. While smartphones enable academic collaboration among students, they can also become a source of distraction. Social media, games, and entertainment apps often pull students' attention away from learning activities, reducing their focus and study efficiency. This issue is significant because

distractions can limit the amount of time students spend productively on English learning tasks. Maharjan (2021) found that smartphone addiction is quite common among university students in Kathmandu. This addictive behavior affects not only academic performance but also students' mental health and well-being. Therefore, it is essential to teach students how to manage their smartphone use responsibly, including strategies for time management and self-control.

A study by Sankhi and Sandnes (2022) found that students using donated smartphones often did not know how to use the devices well and had trouble with basic functions, showing that not all learners benefit equally from mobile learning. Despite these challenges, students find ways to stay focused. My research found that students use simple but smart strategies such as turning off notifications, putting phones on flight mode, using offline features, or following a regular study routine. These findings agree with other research that highlights the importance of self-regulation and motivation. For example, Alzubi and Singh (2017) showed that learners can improve reading skills by using learning strategies through smartphones, especially when they are taught how to use those strategies well. Alzubi (2024) even suggested holding workshops to help students manage mobile learning better. Compared to these studies, my research shows that students are learning how to manage distractions and use smartphones effectively even without formal training. This shows a strong level of learner independence and practical problem-solving, which is important for successful mobile learning. Overall, while smartphones bring many opportunities for language learning, students still need support and awareness to manage challenges and use their devices in the best possible way.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of smartphones for education due to lockdowns and school closures. While smartphones became vital tools for attending online classes and accessing learning materials during this time, the pandemic also exposed many infrastructural weaknesses. Students struggled with unstable internet connections, limited access to devices, and insufficient technical support from schools. We all came across the understanding that these challenges negatively impacted student engagement and increased digital fatigue, showing that simply having a smartphone does not guarantee successful learning outcomes. Effective remote education requires a combination of good technology, proper support, and strategies that protect students' digital well-being.

1.3 Research Gap

The findings of the literature discussed above suggest that the full potential of smartphones in English education can only be realized through careful and deliberate planning. Pedagogical integration must be intentional, with educators receiving professional development and training to use smartphones effectively in their teaching. Schools and educational institutions need to create supportive frameworks that address both technical infrastructure and student guidance. Without these measures, the use of smartphones might remain superficial or even harmful, rather than transformative. Most of the existing research focuses on secondary and undergraduate students, which leaves a notable gap regarding Master-level learners. Advanced learners have more demanding academic needs, such as critical reading of complex texts, academic writing, and conducting research. These areas require different learning tools and support, which current smartphone applications often do not adequately provide. This gap calls for more research focused on the unique challenges faced by graduate students using smartphones for language learning.

Overall, smartphones offer meaningful opportunities to improve English language learning in Nepal. They provide flexible, accessible, and engaging ways to learn that can complement traditional education. However, their success depends on addressing structural barriers like poor internet access, lack of digital literacy, and insufficient institutional support.

Furthermore, tailored strategies must be developed to meet the needs of advanced learners. By resolving these issues, smartphones can become a powerful tool to enhance English education at all levels in Nepal. Findings from this research will contribute to developing informed, context-sensitive approaches to mobile learning in higher education.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to examine the experiences of M.Ed. English major students in Nepal, focusing on their strategies for addressing the challenges of smartphone-assisted language learning. It investigates the opportunities smartphones offer, the challenges students face in using them. It also explores the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. In the meantime, the study seeks to understand how smartphone-based learning complements traditional classroom practices, influencing students' motivation, engagement, and autonomy. Specifically, the study was grounded to answer the following research questions:

- a. What opportunities do smartphones provide for M.Ed. English major students in Nepal to help them learn the English language?
- b. What challenges do the students face when using smartphones as a learning tool?
- c. What strategies do students adopt to overcome the challenges of smartphone-based English learning?

2. Materials and Methods Used

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore the opportunities, challenges, and strategies of master level M. Ed. Fourth-semester students in Nepal while using smartphones to learn English. Narrative inquiry helps us understand students' real-life experiences by allowing them to share their stories and thoughts in their own words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Over three months, we worked with eight students from two universities. These students were between 25 and 30 years old and were carefully chosen to represent different backgrounds and various levels of English skills at their performance. This variety helped us learn about many different experiences related to using smartphones for English learning in Nepal.

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, each lasting around 20 to 25 minutes. It helped us explore their stories of the opportunities and challenges they experienced while using smartphones while learning (Cohen et al., 2018). During these interviews, the students talked about how they used their smartphones for learning English, the challenges they faced, and the ways they dealt with those challenges. They shared their problems, opportunities and challenges of using smartphones for learning in their respective contexts. They also reported the strategies they adopt to utilise smartphones for accomplishing academic tasks. With the students' permission, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed word-for-word to analyze.

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). This method helped us find common themes in the stories while keeping each student's experience clear and personal. We read the transcripts several times, highlighted important points, and grouped these points into main themes that showed both shared and unique challenges as well as strategies students used. To make sure our findings were accurate and trustworthy, we shared early results with the students and asked for their feedback. We also followed ethical rules carefully by getting informed consent, keeping information confidential, and protecting the students' identities.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

The findings of this study highlight university students' experiences regarding the opportunities, challenges, and strategies involved in using smartphones for learning English. Analysis of the interview data revealed three significant themes that provide a comprehensive understanding of how smartphones influence English language learning.

3.1.1 Smartphone-Induced Opportunities for Students in English Learning

The data revealed that university students widely recognized smartphones as valuable tools that significantly enhance their English learning. Smartphones provided flexible and convenient access to a variety of authentic English language resources, such as apps, podcasts, news, videos, and online courses. These resources support the development of all four language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing while allowing learners to engage with content anytime and anywhere, outside traditional classroom settings. In this regard, one student, Abhishek, remarked: "Smartphones enable me to study English anytime and anywhere without needing physical textbooks or classrooms. Many tools like grammar apps, podcasts, and audiobooks help me practice all language skills". Similarly, Kavya highlighted the exposure to authentic materials: "Smartphones give me easy access to news, podcasts, and online courses, which improve my vocabulary and understanding of real-life English usage. Apps like ELSA Speak help me practice pronunciation by comparing my voice with native speakers". Nirmala pointed out the convenience of offline learning: "Apps like Duolingo and Memrise provide offline options, so I can continue learning even without stable internet". Sarmila and Ambika echoed the theme of accessibility and flexibility, emphasizing that smartphones allow continuous vocabulary building and language practice through various tools like dictionaries, grammar aids, and interactive quizzes.

Collectively, the students' experiences demonstrated that smartphones serve as versatile, engaging, and accessible platforms that support personalized and continuous English language learning, making mobile-assisted learning more effective than traditional textbook methods. Students can receive the required content knowledge through illustrative resources for helping them learn English. The multimodal resources available on the internet can easily be accessed at their convenience. Moreover, they can benefit from the downloaded and offline resources from their smartphones in case of weak internet or when they are offline.

3.1.2 Challenges Students Face in Using Smartphones for English Learning

Despite these advantages, students encountered several challenges that can hinder their learning progress. The most commonly reported issues were distraction caused by notifications from social media, games, and entertainment apps, which frequently interrupted study sessions and reduced concentration. To illustrate, Abhishek shared: "I often get distracted by notifications from social media and entertainment apps when I try to focus on learning English". In addition, Kavya also mentioned: "Distractions are a problem, and not all learning apps provide thorough explanations, which sometimes makes understanding difficult. Overreliance on smartphones can also reduce real-life conversation practice, which is crucial for fluency". Technical problems, such as poor internet connectivity and device limitations like slow performance or data loss, were frequently cited by the participants as the challenges of using smartphones in learning. For instance, Sarmila noted: "Sometimes the internet cuts out or my phone hangs, causing me to lose data. To avoid this, I copy important

vocabulary into my notebook”. It showed that the students also faced technical challenges in using the smartphones.

Additional concerns included a lack of guidance in selecting quality learning apps and resources. They also shared that they had difficulties in identifying real-world conversational practices. The sharing revealed that the students’ overuse of smartphones and their distraction during concentrated learning posed negative consequences in their learning. It implies that students’ guidance and an awareness of using smartphones properly for learning are essential. Educational institutions might introduce awareness campaigns for the academic use of smartphones for achieving the learning goals of the students in different circumstances. Moreover, technical knowledge and the skills to find and use educational software for learning are also an essential part of higher education. Additionally, learning English is further easier using smartphones and other ICT tools as English is used as the default medium for operating them.

3.1.3 Overcoming Challenges of Smartphone-Assisted English Learning

To address the challenges they faced while learning, students developed various effective strategies to optimize their smartphone use. A key approach they shared was self-discipline through time management and minimizing distractions. For example, Abhishek shared: “I turn off notifications from non-study apps like social media, email, games, and TikTok to stay focused”. Kavya used a combination of techniques. She stated: “I activate ‘Do Not Disturb’ mode, use focus apps like Forest, schedule specific study times, and restrict myself to educational apps during learning sessions”. Nirmala and Sarmila also used practical measures such as silencing notifications, switching phones to flight mode, or keeping their phones in another room to avoid temptation during intensive study. For example, Sarmila mentioned losing data when her phone hangs or the internet cuts out, so she copies important words into a notebook to avoid losing them. In this regard, Ambika’s remarks were interesting. At the moment, she shared: “I leave my phone in another room when I need to focus on reading or writing to reduce distractions”. These strategies reflect a blend of technological experiences and behavioral practices that support learners’ autonomy and help them maintain focus and discipline.

Overall, the findings illustrate that smartphones offer substantial opportunities for flexible, engaging, and effective English learning by providing accessible resources that cater to all language skills. However, distractions, technical issues, and the need for guided use remain significant challenges. Students actively employ a range of strategies to mitigate these obstacles, demonstrating self-regulation and adaptability in their mobile-assisted language learning journeys. These insights emphasize the importance of balancing technology use with learner autonomy and structured support to maximize language learning outcomes.

4. Discussion

This study shows that university students find smartphones very helpful for learning English. Students appreciate that smartphones give them easy and flexible access to many types of English learning materials, such as apps, podcasts, videos, and online courses. These resources help students improve all language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing and allow them to learn anytime and anywhere, not just in classrooms. Students mentioned how smartphones let them practice English without needing textbooks or classes. They value the chance to hear real-life English through podcasts and use apps that help with pronunciation. They also pointed out that offline options in apps are useful when the internet is not available. They found that smartphones provide constant opportunities to build vocabulary and practice through tools like dictionaries and quizzes. Overall, smartphones

offer a fun, flexible, and accessible way to learn English, often better than traditional textbooks.

However, students also face some challenges. Many said they get distracted by notifications from social media, games, and other apps, which interrupt their study time. They shared that distractions make it hard to focus, and sometimes the learning apps do not explain things clearly. They also noted that relying too much on smartphones might reduce chances to practice speaking in real life, which is important for becoming fluent. Technical problems like poor internet connection and slow or freezing phones were common issues. Some students also struggled to find good learning apps and had fewer chances to practice English conversations with others, which affected their motivation. To overcome these problems, students use several strategies to stay focused. Many turn off notifications or put their phones on 'Do Not Disturb' mode during study time. Others use special focus apps, plan specific times for learning, or keep their phones in another room to avoid distractions. These actions help students stay disciplined and make better use of their smartphones for learning.

Overall, smartphones provide great opportunities for flexible and engaging English learning by giving students access to a wide range of resources. Still, distractions, technical issues, and lack of guidance remain challenges. Students demonstrate their ability to manage these problems by employing various strategies, which help them stay motivated and focused. This balance between using technology and controlling distractions is important for effective learning with smartphones. In my research, we found that students actively utilized language learning apps and dictionaries to enhance their vocabulary retention. Additionally, they engage with English videos, podcasts, and audiobooks to improve listening comprehension and pronunciation. However, this study differs from the research by Sankhi and Sandnes (2022), which focused on individuals using screen readers on donated smartphones without formal training. They reported that participants lacked knowledge about basic operational aspects and had misguided expectations about the technology, highlighting challenges in accessibility and usability. In contrast, our research indicates that students are leveraging smartphones effectively for language learning, suggesting a more informed and purposeful use of technology.

Mobile learning is becoming a big deal in education, especially for foreign language learning. According to Kacetl and Klímová (2019), smartphone-assisted learning offers benefits such as enhancement of students' cognitive skills, increased motivation in study, greater learner autonomy, and confidence in learning. It encourages personalized learning and helps students pursue educational goals faster and more effectively. However, they also mention that while mobile learning has lots of potential, it should be designed and implemented carefully, keeping in mind the students' needs and aiming to provide a balanced approach to teaching different language skills in real-world contexts. This suggestion aligns with the implications of our findings.

Similarly, the findings of this study are in line with the findings of Alzubi and Singh (2017) who suggested the importance of learner autonomy induced through virtual and blended learning using different ICT tools, including smartphones. Their study suggested that learning autonomy can be enhanced by using strategy-based instruction through smartphones, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading contexts. The results showed that students who used these strategies improved their reading comprehension. Building on that, Alzubi (2024) recommended running workshops to teach students how to use these strategies more effectively, especially when learning EFL reading skills through interactive computer systems. In our research, we found that students employed various strategies to manage distractions while learning English on their smartphones. Some of them disable notifications or follow study routines, showing a lot of self-regulation. Others prefer more practical methods, like using flight mode or keeping their phones out of sight to avoid

distractions. These strategies demonstrate a mix of tech-based and behavioral approaches to help students stay focused and disciplined while learning.

5. Conclusion and Implication

This study shows that smartphones are very helpful tools for university students who are learning English. They give students easy and quick access to many useful learning materials, such as language apps, online videos, news articles, podcasts, and grammar tools. These materials help students improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Students enjoy the freedom to study at their own pace and in any place, they choose, whether they are at home, on the bus, or in a park. Smartphones make learning more flexible and convenient, especially for busy students who may not have time to attend regular classes. The students in this study shared that using smartphones made English learning more interesting and allowed them to practice more often. Additionally, the study also found some common problems. One big challenge is distraction. Students often get interrupted by notifications from social media, games, and other apps that take their attention away from learning. This makes it hard for them to stay focused. Another problem is a poor internet connection or slow phone performance, which can stop them from accessing online content. Some students also said that not all learning apps are useful or easy to understand. A few also noted that using smartphones too much can reduce real conversations in English, which are important for improving fluency and confidence.

To deal with these challenges, students used different strategies. Many turned off notifications or used the ‘Do Not Disturb’ feature while studying. Some used focus apps, created study routines, or even kept their phones in another room to avoid distractions. Others downloaded learning materials in advance to use offline, or wrote down important notes in notebooks to resolve the circumstance of losing data. These strategies helped them stay organized, focused, and more in control of their learning. Based on these findings, it is clear that smartphones have great potential to support English learning. But to make the most of them, students need to use smartphones wisely. Teachers, schools, and education planners can help by recommending effective learning apps, teaching students how to manage their time, and showing them how to avoid distractions. Teachers can also encourage students to mix smartphone learning with real-life speaking and writing activities to build fluency. Overall, when used with care and the right strategies, smartphones can make English learning more engaging, flexible, and effective.

As this study focused on the qualitative interview method using narrative inquiry design with only eight participants, this may not fully represent the variety of opportunities and challenges students face in other locations, fields of study, or education levels. Therefore, the results are limited to this particular group and context and may not be applied to all students in general. Future studies should consider including a broader and more diverse range of participants from different areas and academic disciplines to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies related to using smartphones for language learning. Future studies should include more students from different places and backgrounds to learn how smartphone learning works for a wider group of learners.

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