**Article:**

# Smartphone Use for Language Learning

# Before and After the COVID-19 Lockdown

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## Abstract

Smartphones have massive potential for supporting language learning as they provide access to various resources, enable language practice opportunities, and facilitate interactions with other speakers in the target language. This article draws on an ongoing PhD project that investigates how some university learners in Saudi Arabia utilise their smartphones to develop their English language proficiency. The data for this research were collected through interviews with a group of female foundation-year students at a university in Saudi Arabia. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020 before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper considers the influence of the lockdown and online distance learning on students' use of devices and their motivation to use them to learn English. The findings of this study offer insight into how external circumstances and relationships with technology affect the use of mobile devices in language learning.

## Introduction

Smartphones assume a significant role in daily life. The human-machine relationship has advanced to the level of dependency and personal intimacy due to reliance on their applications and functions (Godwin-Jones, 2017). In early 2020, schools and universities closed as part of a nationwide lockdown in Saudi Arabia to combat the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, universities shifted to an online model of learning, and digital technologies have become critical tools for establishing connections between socially distanced people during the lockdown as well as facilitating online education and digital meetings (Shah et al., 2020). Especially under the current circumstances, the widespread usage of smartphones raises questions regarding the implications and considerations of how these devices can benefit language education. Many studies have suggested that, in contexts where English is a foreign language (EFL), technological advancements seem to have advantaged learners to be exposed to the target language as well as to use it in a range of applications and in various ways outside of formal language-learning environments (Hossain, 2018; Metruk, 2020). Despite the myriad of opportunities for English language learning and practice that are facilitated by mobile devices like smartphones, it is unclear in general – especially in Saudi Arabia – how students perceive these resources and interact with them for English language learning as well as whether they are realising and exploiting their full potential.

This paper derives from my doctoral research project, which seeks not only to understand how female university students in Saudi Arabia use their smartphones to learn English but also to identify the perceived values and challenges of smartphones in fostering language learning and self-directed learning from the learners' perspective. In this paper, I briefly discuss two data samples from the data set that illustrate how Rameez and Ameera (both pseudonyms) employ their smartphones for English language learning. Overall, this paper aims to share findings from an exploratory investigation of how Saudi youth have informally utilised

smartphones to engage in language learning before and after the COVID-19 lockdown, and the way in which COVID-19 has impacted the research project.

## Literature Review

### Online Informal Learning of English

Sockett (2014) has employed the term 'online informal learning of English' (OILE) to describe the phenomenon of accessing technology and making use of the expanding resources for English language learning. Notably, 'online' does not refer strictly to online activities (i.e., connected to the internet), as such learning activities could be delivered offline through the use of digital devices. In addition, according to Reinders and Benson (2017), 'informal' is a relative term that suggests that the learning could be motivated by a teacher, an institution, the initiative of the learner, or a combination of these factors, such as in the case of a learner's choice to take an online language course. Toffoli and Sockett (2015) have framed OILE as a process that is driven by the intention to communicate, wherein language learning is a by-product. Although learners may, for example, choose to use English to communicate via social media, they might also intentionally plan to acquire new vocabulary along the way and possibly use a dictionary to promote that process (Lamb and Arisandy, 2019). In this regard, when learners recognise the benefits of applying technology in English language learning outside of the classroom to develop and engage their language skills, "learning stops being a negligible by-product and becomes a deliberate, even if usually secondary, aim" (Trinder, 2017, p. 406). Business university students in Trinder's (2017) study demonstrated awareness of technologies that could foster language learning and used them accordingly. They recalled reading online news in English for the specific purpose of expanding their vocabulary. They also purposefully watched television series and films to enhance their language skills, although they may have primarily consumed such content for the subject knowledge and entertainment. In view of these results, the study has concluded that "informal learning involves an element of language choice and is intentional, rather than implicit" (Trinder, 2017, p. 410).

### Mobile-assisted Language Learning

Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a form of language learning that is assisted or enhanced by the use of a handheld mobile device (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Students can learn more quickly by utilising mobile devices as they enable rapid internet access, easy retrieval of the required information, and language support. The literature has defined many dimensions of mobile devices in the context of language learning. For instance, Lai and Zheng (2018) and Sung et al. (2015) have identified the following aspects of MALL: mobility, which permits students to learn whenever and wherever they choose; authenticity and social interaction, through which students share, interact, and communicate with others; individuality, which allows for personalised learning and support for a range of teaching and learning styles; and timely help and feedback. The category 'mobile devices' encompasses any type of handheld device (e.g., smartphone or tablet) that supports this procedure; however, the present study only examines smartphones.

Learning a language is a complex process that many scholars have attempted to explain via language learning theories. This section discusses how input, output, and social interaction relate to the use of smartphones for language learning. According to Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, humans learn languages through exposure to 'comprehensible input', wherein

they process linguistic data that is slightly above their current level. Input for language learning is gained by listening and reading the target language. However, it is not the only element that contributes significantly to language learning. Swain (1985) argued that verbal production (i.e., output) is also needed to enhance language accuracy and fluency. This output hypothesis dictates that interactions in the target language promote language acquisition through production and comprehension. Long (1996) later formulated the interactionist hypothesis, which predicts that the most significant element of language learning is not what the learners hear but rather how they interact. From the interactionist perspective, language learning takes place in conversations through conscious error repair and clarifications (Cook, 2013). The social element of learning stems from the work of Vygotsky (1978), who has emphasised the influence of cultural and social factors on language development. His sociocultural theory maintains that learning is a social process that occurs when people interact. This theory underlies the role of input and interaction in language learning.

Various smartphone platforms have created possibilities for language learners to practise their English skills and interact in the target language. Sockett (2014) claimed that technology can enhance the rate of language input and therefore improve learning. As indicated by previous studies, learners use mobile devices to gain language exposure (input) through entertainment, including films and social media, information from documentaries and news channels, and language learning platforms like language applications and social media language pages (Mindog, 2016; Lai et al., 2018; Luef et al., 2020). Mindog (2016) and Lai et al (2018) have implied that learners utilise some of these resources for exposure to the casual vocabulary of everyday life. Through social applications, such as social media platforms, students can engage in English conversations and befriend proficient English speakers. Sockett (2014) has highlighted that social media platforms encourage language learners to react to written and oral stimuli by writing comments or participating in an interaction. In this regard, Mindog (2016) investigated the utilisation of smartphone applications by four Japanese university students to support EFL. The study found that social media platforms were the most popular, and learners used them to improve their communicative abilities and interact with English speakers (Mindog, 2016). However, in a study by Lai et al (2018) in Hong Kong, many university students who were learning foreign languages avoided engaging in social technological experiences for various reasons, such as concerns about their language proficiency and fear of humiliation. Smartphones also assist learners with technological and non-technologically mediated language learning and communication activities using online dictionaries and translators like Google Translate. In the research by Lai et al (2018), learners used their devices to, for example, understand a text or song lyric.

## Methodology

## Participants

In the present research, I adopted purposive sampling in which selection of the individuals can purposefully gain understanding of the research problem or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017).  Merriam (2002) argues that to begin purposeful sampling, the researcher must first determine the selection criteria for the study participants. The target population for this study were a) foundation-year female university students in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, who b) volunteered to take part in the study, and c) use their smartphones for English language learning.  In this article, I discuss only two data samples from the eight cases. The article's objectives led to the choice of these two cases. Rameez and Ameera answered in length

questions about the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on their use of smartphones for language learning in the second interview and presented different backgrounds and practices. Both participants were in their foundation year at the time of their first interviews but had already started to study their chosen majors (organic chemistry and medical physics, respectively) by the time their second interviews were conducted.

## Research Procedures and Data Collection

This study used qualitative design to gain an in-depth understanding of Saudi female university students experiences with using smartphones to facilitate English language learning and self-directed learning before and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Creswell (2007) and Hennink et al., (2011) report that qualitative research approaches are ideal for researchers who seek detailed and contextualised data. To interpret the phenomena and understand participants' perceptions, I collected data using semi-structured interviews. I planned for two face-to-face interviews that lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour to ensure I could fully explore their life experiences in context and closely examine their smartphone usage in relation to language learning (Seidman, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007).

To recruit participants, I visited several foundation-year classrooms at the target university. In the classroom visits, I explained my research goals and how the students would be part of it and then asked them to fill in the online survey shared with them through their teachers in the class WhatsApp group. The online surveys were administered to secure background information about the potential participants and to obtain their contact details. After the students filled in the online survey and agreed on participating in the interviews, I selected eight participants from the online surveys who showed various educational backgrounds (e.g., private and state schools) and language learning experiences (e.g., English courses and self-study). I contacted each participant via WhatsApp to arrange interviews. In preparation for the interviews, I booked a meeting room in the university in the same building where the students take their foundation classes so it is convenient for them.

### Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Data Collection

In the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I contacted potential participants and conducted a couple of interviews. However, in the middle of my data collection process, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the university to close and the country to enter a lockdown. Consequently, I could not carry on with my fieldwork for a while, as the unprecedented circumstances revealed themselves to be particularly challenging and affected research participation, instruments, and timeline. Some participants withdrew or were not responding, so I had to recruit a few new participants. Conveniently, I was able to share the same online survey with my colleagues and asked them to send it to their classes WhatsApp group[1] only after changing the last questions details where it asked about the time and date of the interview as this had to be more flexible with the online interviews and was arranged later personally via WhatsApp messages unlike in the face-to-face interviews where it was planned during their breaks and I had a meeting room booked for limited hours. I also had to adjust the interview structure and questions. For example, in the face-to-face interviews, I asked the

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[1] In the foundation year in Saudi universities, students usually have WhatsApp groups for each module/subject with or without the teacher.

participants to demonstrate how they used their smartphones for learning, and I captured videos and screenshots to understand which tools they use and how they operate. However, due to change in the interview medium to online interviews, I had to replace the method of capturing a screen recording of participants' smartphone screens with that of a detailed description of use, and I asked them to share the platforms they mentioned in the interviews as we were talking or immediately upon completion of the interviews. Most importantly, I had to be patient, as the process of planning and performing online interviews was more time consuming than I had expected. It was sometimes challenging to talk to participants when they had unstable internet connection or did not offer as much information as they would have in face-to-face meetings. Still, it was thought-provoking to observe how some students talked freely over the phone about their frustrations with the educational system or the lockdown, though others barely answered questions when human eye contact was missing.

## Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process started by reading through transcribed interviews, identifying emergent recurring themes, commenting on them in text using MAXQDA software, and colouring them differently to unite common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Using MAXQDA for the data analysis provided me with the means to sort the data and easily access the coded segments of data, form categories, edit them, and identify themes. The data were analysed inductively through a cyclical and evolving process of coding and recoding. Driven by a constructivist-interpretative paradigm, this study tends to focus on considering the practices from the perspectives of those who live them (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Such research aims to understand and present the learners' experiences, the meanings they give to their actions, and how they get along in a particular educational EFL context.

## **Findings**

This section first provides an overview of the types of online informal learning of English activities in which Rameez and Ameera engaged. The data contain some indications of the ways in which these learners process the input and achieved new language uptake. The second part of the section describes the potential influence of the COVID-19 lockdown on the use of smartphones by these participants in relation to language learning.

## Smartphone Usage for English Learning by Female Saudi University Students

In their interviews, Rameez and Ameera highlighted the role of films, series, music, and social media platforms in generating opportunities for language exposure and interactions for language learning.

### *Films and Series*

Some young Saudis, including Ameera, prefer American entertainment and drama over Arabic equivalents. Ameera shared that she would usually spend an hour in bed every night watching English-language films or series with English subtitles before falling asleep. She believed that such continuous consumption of film and series was helpful in improving her oral skills and vocabulary. On the other hand, Rameez stated that she would watch films in English because exposure to the target language facilitated her learning of English. She noted, "I sometimes watch with Arabic subtitles, and I try not to see the subtitle and only listen". Both learners

found that watching series and films was beneficial for improving their listening skills. Notably, both participants preferred to watch films on a smartphone – as opposed to a device with a larger screen – because they liked to hold the device in their hands, and they could carry it with them at all times.

*Songs*

Participants also reported engaging with music as an English language activity. Rameez and Ameera often attempted to understand the theme or meaning of a song based on the lyrics or by focusing on the words that they could understand. Both participants frequently listened to English-language songs and often simultaneously searched for the lyrics online to better comprehend their meaning or to be able to sing along. Ameera explained:

> "I try to find what that singer says because, you know, they talk too much, and I do not understand. Sometimes, I challenge myself that I get what they say without seeing the lyrics. And if I don't, I just see the lyrics."

Rameez would also listen to songs repeatedly, recite them, and translate them to Arabic to determine their meaning and learn new words. She explained that she would use English-language songs for the purpose of language learning:

> "I want to learn! I listen because I want to practise. I prefer Arabic songs; I don't love English songs…their songs are without feelings! I listen for language and fun."

*Use of Subtitles and Lyrics for English Learning*

Subtitles in foreign films, series, and television programs can either caption the spoken language or translate the dialogue to the native language of the audience. Arabic television channels present foreign entertainment with translated subtitles. However, with smart televisions and the use of a range of devices to consume media, viewers have a choice between, for example, English and Arabic subtitles. Ameera opted for English subtitles to allow her to monitor the speech whereas Rameez preferred to use Arabic subtitles to better understand the dialogue. Interestingly, their choices of subtitle language mirror their respective approaches to using songs for language practice which seems to reflect their English proficiency. Ameera would use English subtitles and read song lyrics to acquire new vocabulary or phrases that she could not hear otherwise, while Rameez would try to focus on the audio of English films while using Arabic subtitles to immediately determine the meaning of the dialogue, and she would translate song lyrics into Arabic to understand them more clearly.

*Social Media Platforms*

Popular social media platforms include Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. However, Facebook is no longer commonly used by younger generations in Saudi Arabia. Rameez would use Snapchat to listen to English speakers by watching their stories; in contrast, Ameera perceived it as a private platform for having fun and socialising with family and friends – "not for learning".  This section discusses how the participants primarily used the Twitter and Instagram smartphone applications to support them in learning English. They shared that they

would check these two applications regularly throughout the day to scroll through images, read captions, and watch brief videos.

Ameera and Rameez reported using social media platforms to seek out English-language content either for general language exposure or to learn everyday language. They followed the accounts of celebrities they admire or of random users they encountered who post in English. Rameez stated that she followed many celebrities on Twitter and Instagram to read and listen to English. Ameera commented:

> "Well, I follow some people because they always, always tweet positive things. And I know every time I open my Twitter, I see English words and English sentences, so I keep reading English every day."

Both participants mentioned following language learning accounts to improve their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Ameera claimed that the accounts would help her revise what she had learned in class, while Rameez shared that she could learn new sentences and words every day from language learning accounts on Instagram. Both women appreciated that many of these accounts were created by Arab speakers, as they would explain the meaning of the words in Arabic, the difference between the two languages, and their usage in context. Ameera clarified:

> "Sometimes they give a phrase that, if you translate in Arabic, it has a different meaning. This is one of the things that I really like because sometimes you understand something, but it means other things."

*Use of Social Media Platforms to Practise English Interactions*

Both Rameez and Ameera sought opportunities outside of the classroom to practise English. The former would attempt to use English with waiters in restaurants and with her family's foreign driver, while the latter would speak in English with her brothers who studied abroad in the USA. They also use the language online and try to understand its usage by posting on social media, chatting with friends via instant messenger, and conversing with English speakers and tutors. In general, social media platforms facilitate the social experiences of Saudi students in the EFL context.

The participants in this study stated that they used Twitter and WhatsApp to develop their language skills. Ameera occasionally preferred to express herself in English when posting on social media. She recalled an experience where, after posting a film review on Twitter, a Canadian user messaged her to agree with her tweet. Their relationship developed, and they discovered many commonalities between them; now, they regularly talk via Facetime (video call, audio) and WhatsApp (texting). Ameera believed that she enhanced her English fluency, accent, and word choices by talking to her Canadian friend because she encouraged her friend to correct her when she made mistakes. In addition, Ameera and her friends would send English voice messages in their WhatsApp group to practise the language. Often, they would listen again to the recordings and laugh at their mistakes. Rameez shared that she would post English quotations and sentences with pictures on Twitter and Instagram. When she liked a sentence that she read online, she would save it and then translate it with the Google

Translate application to understand it before posting it in English. Rameez would also practise by chatting in English with her family's driver, who could not speak Arabic, via WhatsApp.


*Translation Applications*

Both learners used online translation tools to understand, revise, and learn the target language vocabulary. Interestingly, Ameera would use English-to-English translation in these applications to obtain definitions and explanations of words in English. She clarified this choice by explaining that some words have different meanings in the two languages. Rameez would translate words and phrases into Arabic for comprehension purposes and into English for production purposes. Both women elaborated on the ability of smartphones to provide immediate help with understanding unfamiliar vocabulary and resolving communication breakdowns in a fast and convenient fashion.

In summary, Rameez and Ameera utilised their smartphones to practise receptive skills and learn vocabulary from films, songs, and social media platforms. They also used social media and other platforms to practise speaking English and engaging in written interactions. Remarkably, the two participants did not address language applications or websites beyond their use for exam preparation (e.g., IELTS); therefore, these are not discussed here.


## Impact of COVID-19 on Smartphone Usage for English Learning by Saudi Female University Students

This section examines the possible effects of the lockdown and the shift to online education on the participants' self-initiated use of smartphones for language learning. Many individuals have increased their use of smartphones during the COVID-19 lockdown. Both Ameera and Rameez relied on their smartphones more heavily to chat with friends, check social media platforms, watch films, series, and YouTube videos, and attend classes or meetings. In her second interview in October 2020 (the first interview was in February 2020 – pre-lockdown), Rameez shared the realisation that her English learning activities had declined during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. She shared that she did not do language learning activities with her smartphone or check the language accounts that she followed because her 'eyes hurt' from constantly focusing on her smartphone screen to use social media during the lockdown.

The respondents' technology usage was affected by the new circumstances. In her first interview, Ameera said, "I actually learn everything on my phone" and, as illustrated above, she explained that she would improve her English by using her smartphone. However, when the lockdown ended, she started to leave her phone at home when going out, and she no longer accessed social media platforms or actively used her phone as she previously had, in general and for language learning. Ameera hated being attached to her smartphone, as she used it all the time during the lockdown for "things that are not useful and wasted her time, like Tiktok." [2] Rameez also described how the nature of online education changed her motivation to use her phone for learning:

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[2] Ticktok is a social network for sharing user-generated videos, mostly of people lip-synching or dancing to popular songs.

> "I feel that I don't want to use my phone for learning as I used
> to because, before, we had books and technology for support,
> but now it is all on our devices, and that is not really nice."

Ameera and Rameez realised that their English-language abilities were diminishing because they had stopped practising their English during the lockdown period. Therefore, they tried to find ways to improve their language skills. Ameera was frustrated by the feeling that her English abilities declined due to a lack of exposure and practice, and she needed to identify means of developing her English. In the first interview, she said, "reading books is not for me" and that she never read books either in English or Arabic. However, in her later interview, she stated that she had "started a new habit in the lockdown" – reading – because she wanted to learn English by reading books. She started to read physical books that she borrowed from her brother, and she downloaded PDF versions of books to read on her phone. She noted that this new hobby was inspired by Twitter academic and language learning accounts. In addition, Rameez had started watching English vlogs and challenges on YouTube without subtitles and only used translation applications if she could not understand a particular word.

In summary, the data from the two participants in this study indicate that the lockdown influenced their smartphone usage in general and for language learning activities. Both participants reported that their heightened smartphone usage during the lockdown period had a negative impact on them both physically (e.g., screen fatigue) and emotionally (e.g., attachment to their smartphones). Moreover, they disliked the shift to online education, as they believed that technology should support learning rather than serving as the primary medium of learning. These perspectives, along with the pandemic-induced stress, led Rameez and Ameera to discontinue many of their smartphone-enabled language learning activities, such as browsing social media language pages. However, upon recognising the importance of maintaining and improving their language skills, Ameera started a new habit of reading e-books, and Rameez began to watch YouTube videos.

## Conclusion

The findings in this article evidence that learners employ smartphones to enrich their language learning, and the nature of their usage varies depending on individual preferences and circumstances. These findings illustrate how EFL learners in Saudi Arabia derive benefits from their devices when learning a language, as these devices enable them to gain language exposure, practise a range of skills, and interact online in English. Furthermore, the research highlights possible influencing factors in the use of technology for learning, which include the relationship of learners with their devices, the surrounding circumstances, and the nature of formal learning.

It is important to acknowledge that my doctoral research is merely exploratory and still ongoing, and the presented data reflect only some instances of smartphone usage by two key participants. This data sample can be viewed as a glimpse into the informal use of smartphones by Saudi youth to support their English language development. Furthermore, it delivers interesting insights regarding how their self-initiated use of technology for learning has changed with the transition to online education due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic affected my research project timeline and process. Due to the lockdown

and stressful times, completing the data collection process took nine months instead of the initial plan of three months. However, participants were able to answer questions and share their experiences learning English with the support of their smartphones through the adjusted instruments.

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