

Students' Preference for English Writing Learning Using Digital Activities on Smartphones Inside and Outside Classroom

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Abstract

At present, the digital technology has been involved in all developments in life, including English language teaching and learning, especially in the developing countries like Thailand. As technology has been being developed and incorporated, inevitably, this rapid digital transformation has changed the traditional ways of learning. Therefore, to conduct an instruction with an effective integration of technology, students' preference should be sought out. This article explored the students' preference for English writing learning with the use of digital activities on smartphones inside and outside classroom. An online questionnaire and a semi-structure interview were utilized with a group of students taking lower intermediate academic English in a private university in Thailand. The findings revealed that **Line** and **Facebook** were the preferred platforms for inside-and-outside classroom, collaborative English writing activities at a paragraph level, improving the areas of content, vocabulary, grammar, and organization. The students believed that digital collaborative writing activities could help to improve their writing ability and be prepared for the examinations. The article concludes that the digital technology that is suitable to university students' characteristics of the digital generation should be incorporated into collaborative English writing instruction both inside and outside classroom.

Keywords: Students' preference, Digital natives, Digital natives' characteristics, Digital activities through smartphones, Collaborative English writing, Digital technology for language learning.

Introduction

Technology has been being integrated into English language teaching and learning for the past decades starting from the lab headphones to the digital mobile devices for both in-class instructions and outside-class practices (Elearning Infographics, 2014). At the present time, in a lower-intermediate academic English course in a private university in Thailand where this present study was conducted, conventional tools for teaching generally included textbooks, computer, and software such as PowerPoint and basic tools for learning generally included

textbooks and notepaper. However, undergraduate students who are in the generation of digital natives can be more motivated when learning can take advantage of digital technology such as online games, and language applications on smartphones like Quizlet, and Padlet, adding up a variety of smart activities into the instructions including English writing instructions. It is beneficial for the students when teachers can appropriately assemble the digital tools in the process of learning and teaching. It needs an investigation into the learners' preference in order that teachers can incorporate suitably the today-available digital technology into their English instructions. This study, therefore, aimed to explore the students' preference for English writing learning with the use of digital activities on smartphones inside and outside classroom using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Related Literature Review

Research concerning the analysis of students' preference for English writing learning with the use of digital activities on smartphones incorporate learners and their characteristics, suitable teaching and learning environment, and technology for SLA and collaborative learning.

Digital Natives and Proper Learning Environment

Digital Natives' Characteristics. To study learners' preference, the learners and their characteristics should be placed in focus. In this digital era, the students in class today can be called the "Digital Natives" who are defined by Prensky as:

Group of young people who have been immersed in technology all their lives, giving them distinct and unique characteristics that set them apart from previous generations, and who have sophisticated technical skills and learning preferences for which traditional education is unprepared (2001, p.15).

De Bruyckere et al. (2016) and De Paiva Franco (2013) conducted research by observing students' characteristics. They reported the differences between the digital-native generation and other generations. As summarized, they are gaming, interactive, simultaneous, multitasking, team-oriented, collaborative, rapid information processing, and living a digital life. These unique traits require suitable teaching and learning style designed for them described as follows.

Proper Learning Environment. It is necessary for educational institutions and teachers to manage a proper teaching and learning environment so as to suit learners' characteristics and their learning styles (Alamri et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it might be quite challenging to provide the learning atmosphere and environment that will suit each individual learning style. It is recommended that the basic instructional and learning environment requirements to conduct suitable instructions should be in careful consideration (Feng, 2020; Heinich et al. 2001; Irudayasamy et al., 2018; Kehing & Yunus, 2021; Sun & Gao, 2020). A good instructional environment should promote motivation for English learning

and practices, active participation, social interaction, learning collaboration and feedbacks within the authentic context using effective teaching methods, tools, and technology to refine the individual differences and to support all learners' intellectual development in general.

In her design of a model of English writing instruction using digital activities on smartphones, Ngamsomjit (2021) suggested primary qualities of the proper learning atmosphere and environment should be interactive, collaborative, motivating, engaging, anywhere and anytime, instant, and simultaneous based on the indicated learners' characteristics.

Technology for SLA and Collaborative Learning

Recent research has pointed out that the rapid developments of the digital technology have been changing the integration of technology and media into English language education rendering how the language is learned has been changed since the digital mobile technology integrated into instructions has enhanced English language learning to be more authentic, meaningful, contextual, instant, and simultaneous (Otto, 2017; Salaberry, 2001; Villalobos 2014). Therefore, predictably, in this era of the digital transformation, in terms of the sociocultural-cognitive perspective, learning through digital normalization with its traits as interactive, collaborative, and co-constructive should be investigated regarding the roles of peer constructive feedbacks, responses, negotiations, and elaborations through collaborative and interactive learning in view of the fact that the attributes mentioned positively affect learners' second language acquisition (Chapelle, 2007; Chen et al., 2017; Godwin-Jones, 2017; Jarvis & Achilleos, 2013; Kajornboon, 2013; Long, 1996; Margolis, 2020; Shooshtari & Mir, 2014; Srinivas, 2010; Wichadee, 2013).

Researchers have reported positive findings of collaborative learning, a learning with its principle of augmenting students' learning by way of group work, that collaborative learning can increase learners' encouragement in learning more than learning alone as it can create cooperative and friendly learning environment enhancing learners' motivation, confidence in learning, and academic achievement including English learning (Hogg, 2011, 2016; Joyce & Weil, 2003; Maitra, 2017). Especially in English writing teaching, many studies claimed that collaborative learning with the use of technology can even increase benefits to the students (Chen et al., 2017; Ekahitanond, 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2017; Kim et al., 2013; Lan & Huang, 2012). However, collaboration in learning might not positively favor all students on account of the learners' individual differences. Based on a study by Shafie et al. (2010), anxiety and new knowledge acquisition problem might be possible among learners who process low English proficiency and ineffective social skills. Therefore, this current research has paid attention to the learners' preference so as to choose the proper teaching methods, tools and technology to alleviate the precautioned challenge.

Research Methodology

Context

The present research was conducted in a lower intermediate academic English course through communicative activities developing all four skills in meaningful academic EFL contexts in a private international university in Thailand where students' mother tongues were various including Thai, Chinese, Burmese, Cambodian, and more; therefore, English was used as the medium of the instructions. Additionally, it aimed to develop English writing instructions using digital activities to use with the current commercial textbook exercises which explicitly emphasized text models rather than process of writing.

Participants

Quantitatively, participants of the current research's survey included 47 university students in the 18 - 25 age range with different English language proficiency from different faculties. They were studying in a lower-intermediate English course offered by a private, international university in Thailand in 2019. Additionally, after the online survey, qualitatively, five semi-structured individual interviews were conducted so as to gain more insightful information and clarification. Five interviewees were chosen from the 47 survey participants based on different opinions and preferences observed. The participants were students who showed preference for social platforms, who preferred another digital platform to the mainstream platforms, and who showed no preference for digital technology.

Research Instruments

An explanatory mixed method with a quantitative research instrument, an online questionnaire, followed by a qualitative semi-structured interview were used with the current research. The questionnaire was used to obtain primary information, while the semi-structure interview was used to gain deeper insights. Quantitatively, the online questionnaire used various points Likert scale since the students' preferences would be measured based on agreement, desire, frequency, and importance. It consisted of four parts totaling twenty-two questions, asking about the personal information, the experience of mobile devices, the use of mobile devices for English learning and practice, and the preference for the digital activities for English writing inside and outside of the classroom. For validity of the instrument, three experts were invited to rate the instruments, yielding a positive value (0.82) with suggestions for necessary instrumental improvement. Regarding the internal consistency and reliability, Cronbach's Alpha value (0.82) yielded a good result. Qualitatively, the five individual semi-structured interviews consisted of three questions asking about their preference and their beliefs what could be appropriate and beneficial for them as the digital activities for the English writing practice.

Data Analysis

For the online questionnaire, statistically, percentage, Mean, and SD values were calculated. For the semi-structure interview, the data was analyzed and themed descriptively for data interpretation.

Findings

The findings of students' preference for English writing learning with the use of digital activities on smartphones inside and outside classroom can be presented according to the results revealed by the online questionnaire and the semi-structure interview as follows.

The questionnaire explored the use of mobile devices for English learning and practice. Firstly, three types of the mobile devices were reported as the digital devices for English learning and practice as follows (See Table 1).

Table 1

Mobile Devices for English Learning & Practice

Types of Mobile Devices	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Smartphone	3.59	0.55	Extremely desirable
Laptop	2.56	0.98	Very desirable
Tablet	2.46	0.95	Somewhat desirable

Table 1 showed that smartphones (\bar{X} = 3.59, SD= 0.55) were chosen as the extremely desirable mobile device whereas the laptops (\bar{X} = 2.56, SD= 0.98) were chosen as their second alternative one. Tablets (\bar{X} = 2.46, SD= 0.95) were found to be somewhat desirable.

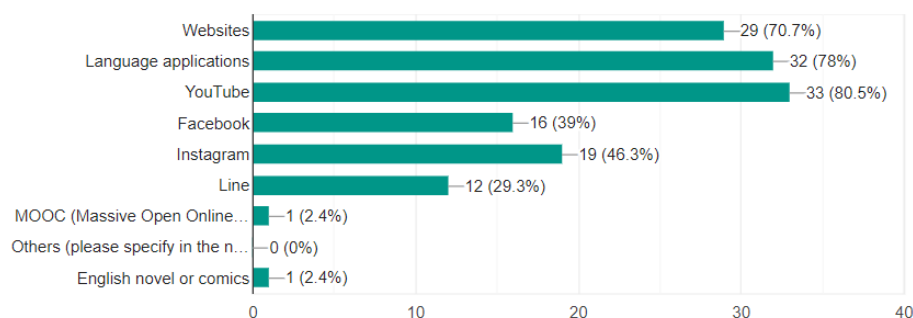
Secondly, the findings indicated that the students normally used digital tools to practice and/or learn English in their daily lives as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Digital Tools for English Learning & Practice

Which of the following digital tools do you normally use to practice or learn English?

41 responses



In terms of social media applications, Figure 1 revealed that the majority of the students (80.5%) accepted that YouTube was their most favorite digital tool for English learning and practice. The students also chose the following social media platforms: Instagram (46.3%), Facebook (39%) and Line (29.3%), respectively. Additionally, the language applications (78%) and websites (70.7%) were chosen as the contemporary digital tool for English learning and practice.

Thirdly, regarding the English areas in which students desired to improve, Table 2 presented Mean and SD values as follows.

Table 2

English Areas to Improve

Language Areas	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Vocabulary	3.32	0.69	Extremely desirable
Translation	3.27	0.81	Extremely desirable
Grammar	3.27	0.84	Extremely desirable
Listening	3.22	0.82	Very desirable
Writing	3.05	0.77	Very desirable
Speaking	3.05	0.84	Very desirable
Reading	2.95	0.74	Very desirable

The survey results (See Table 2) indicated that vocabulary (\bar{X} = 3.32, SD= 0.69) was chosen as the extremely desirable area while translation (\bar{X} = 3.27, SD= 0.81) and grammar (\bar{X} = 3.27, SD= 0.84) were equally selected as the second extremely desirable area. Listening (\bar{X} = 3.22, SD= 0.82) was the third, very desirable chosen area while writing (\bar{X} = 3.05, SD= 0.77) and speaking (\bar{X} = 3.05, SD= 0.84) were equally the fourth. Reading (\bar{X} = 2.95, SD= 0.74) was the last one selected.

Fourthly, as the findings of the students' preference from the current research were brought to further design a model of a writing instruction (Ngamsomjit, 2021), investigation into their opinions about the English writing areas they aimed to improve reflected the areas of writing they gave priority to. The results revealed that they gave 'important' to all the areas of English writing including content, vocabulary, grammar, and organization (See Table 3).

Table 3

English Writing Areas to Improve

Areas of Writing	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Content	3.36	1.48	Important
Vocabulary	3.36	1.38	Important
Grammar	3.21	1.02	Important
Organization	3.02	1.00	Important

The students believed all areas were important to improve. The findings indicated that vocabulary (\bar{X} = 3.36, SD= 1.38) and content (\bar{X} = 3.36, SD= 1.48) were equally the first

two important writing areas, and grammar (\bar{X} = 3.21, SD= 1.02) was the second area. Organization (\bar{X} = 3.02, SD= 1) was the last important area that the students believed they should improve.

Furthermore, the survey observed the students' preference for the important features the writing activities should have to help them learn and practice English writing as follows (See Table 4).

Table 4

Important Things to Be Included in the Digital Writing Activities

No.	Important Features to Be Included	Rank of Importance	Frequency (%)
1	Same exercises as the textbook	Most important	50.00
2	Additional exercises for practice	More important	57.14
3	Quiz and exam samples for practice		47.62
4	Students' own choices for topics and ideas		59.52
5	Classmates' feedback and comments	Important	66.67
6	Class collaboration/ class work		66.67
7	Open to public	Less important	54.76
8	Online interaction with others		64.29
9	Online access at any time and any where	Least important	66.67

In terms of the frequency of the chosen items, the students chose the same exercises as the textbook (50%) as the most important feature to be included. Also, they chose additional exercises for practice (57.14%) and the quiz and exam samples for practice (47.62%) as more important. Next, they chose the students' own choices for topics and ideas (59.52%), the classmates' feedback and comments (66.67%), and the class collaboration/ class work (66.67%) as important. Additionally, they chose the open to public (54.76%), and the online interaction with others (64.29%) as less important. Finally, they chose online access anytime and anywhere (66.67%) as the least important item to be included.

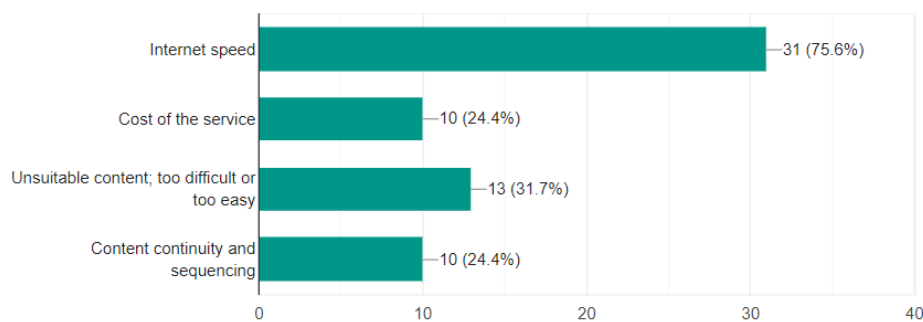
Lastly, the current research explored the problems the students used to encounter while using the mobile devices for English learning and practice as follows.

Figure 2

Problems Found

Have you ever experienced any problems when using the mobile devices for English learning and practice?

41 responses



It was reported that Internet speed (75.6%) was the most common problem. The second reported problem was on the unsuitable content: too difficult or too easy (31.7%). Lastly and equally, cost of the service and the content continuity and sequencing (24.4%) were reported.

Qualitatively, the results from the individual semi-structured interviews yielded more insightful results. The students reported that **Line**, **Facebook**, **Instagram**, and **YouTube** were used to explore new and interesting things like the findings from the questionnaire. Nonetheless, particularly, they thought **YouTube** allowed them to learn how to do things, not just English while **Instagram** was for reading interesting stories and seeing pictures of other people. And by reading captions and descriptions in English, they could learn English by themselves. Additionally, **Facebook** was reported to be the most suitable social media application for English learning since it offered functions for collaborative learning. Moreover, most of them believed that social media applications could be usefully integrated into English instruction both inside classroom and outside classroom.

Discussion and Implication of the Findings

The findings could fulfill the current research's objective in exploring the students' preference for English writing learning with the use of digital activities on smartphones inside and outside classroom. The results could then be brought to use as the base information in the design of a writing instruction suitable for university students with the characteristics of digital natives. Certain points to be discussed and implications to be brought to the instruction include as in the following.

Firstly, regarding the students' preference for digital devices and platforms, the findings confirmed that smartphones were the most chosen mobile device for English learning and practice while tablets were somewhat desirable. This might be because a tablet could not offer as effective functions for learning as a smartphone which was smaller and more portable, and not all students possessed a tablet. Although the findings revealed that **YouTube** was the most favorite digital platform, other platforms such as **Instagram**, **Facebook**, and **Line** were also

used for different usages for English learning and practice, for instance **YouTube** for learning how to do something, **Facebook** for reading and sharing news and stories, and **Line** for discussing. The findings that different digital tools and platforms could be used to serve the students different purposes in learning English are also reported by Kim et al. (2010, 2015) and Sun & Gao (2020) in that choices of users were influenced by the suitability of the technology for different tasks, and it could positively affect students' intrinsic motivation in using technology and learning. The findings could thus confirm that it is required for the English instruction incorporating digital technology to conduct a proper planning, design, and selection to suit and achieve the learning objectives and to motivate the learners to participate and be active in their learning.

Suitable time and place to conduct the English learning activities is the next regard. It was found that the social media applications could be used for English instructions both inside classroom and outside classroom and that was congruent with Godwin-Jones (2017) who claimed that the students were familiar with using the reported social media platforms for their own self-study whenever they were at leisure. That also conformed with Wiengnil (2014) who mentioned the importance of integrating the out-of-class learning activities into the in-class activities since the out-of-class activities could be the source of the extrinsic motivation which would increase the inspiration of the students (as the intrinsic motivation) for their increasing learning engagement. However, the findings of the current research reported about the students giving little importance to the activity features of online interaction with others and online access anytime and anywhere. The results might be explained by their indifference feelings about communicating each other online due to their familiarity with the nature of social media platforms that were already equipped with the online and social networking functions, making them see the situations as normal and nothing additionally required.

Furthermore, the findings of the current research indicated that the students acknowledged the importance of the collaborative writing learning with peer feedback and comments in that such learning activity was considered an important feature to include in the teaching writing. Many studies also reported the students' responses about seeing the importance of the collaborative writing learning with peer feedback and comments in teaching writing as in the research by Chen et al. (2017), Ekahitanond (2018), Godwin-Jones (2017), Kajornboon (2013), and Shooshtari and Mir (2014).

Lastly, the findings of the current study yield the pedagogical implications in that analyzing the learners is necessary for the process of a specific instructional design. The analysis of the students' preference for English writing learning using digital activities on smartphones was essential for creating the proper learning environment that not only can fulfill the students' requirements, but also attract their interests in learning. The instructions using digital technology should be designed and developed to give a personal touch to each individual student to respond to their personal requirements, learning expectations and objectives since the satisfactory learning environment attracting their interests can positively influence their

learning motivation. This can encourage and engage them in their learning process to successfully acquire the English knowledge and academic development as aimed. Additionally, modern technology advancement and new technological trends will change and further influence the students' characteristics and their digital culture. Those current effective instructions may become unsatisfactory and ineffective one day through the changes. Therefore, it should be the teachers' commitment to occasionally examine their instructions and explore new tools and technology to design and create a new instruction with proper learning environment integrating technology into English activities for the effective English learning enhancement.

Conclusion

Although the current research observed the preference of the university students with lower-intermediate English proficiency, its findings yielded insight into the potential integration of the digital technology, particularly smartphones and the social media platforms, into English writing activities promoting writing collaboration with peer feedback inside and outside classroom. Teachers should not ignore learners' characteristics (De Bruyckere et al., 2016; De Paiva Franco, 2013) leading to individual differences including their learning styles which require suitable instructions, proper learning environment, and tools for their effective learning (Heinich et al., 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Sun & Gao, 2020). The results can be applied to other contexts of English instructions with other levels of the learners' English proficiency. However, there are other areas such as genres of English writing, other digital platforms, and comparative study between individual practice and collaborative practice that this current research has not taken into account. Further studies then could be conducted for more insight into the broader integration of the digital technology into English writing instruction.

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