Perception of Students on the Use of Mobile Phones in EFL Learning: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This research study focuses on the students' perception on the use of mobile phones in EFL learning in the context of Nepal. It aims to investigate how the students are taking smart phones as a means for EFL learning in their educational experience. The study was carried out among the students of the bachelor level at Dhankuta Multiple Campus. It was largely informed by a phenomenological approach in order to examine the students' experiences of using mobile phones in EFL learning. The semi- structured interview was held to collect the required data. Results indicate that all participants have positive attitudes on the use of mobile phones in learning English. However, they feel a few difficulties in understanding the text through the mobile phones. They expect supportive guidance and reliable network quality for effective EFL learning. Mobile phones can serve as a useful language learning tool if it is utilized properly for specific purposes. All curriculum developers, syllabus designer and policy makers should consider the space of mobile assisted English language learning in the present curriculum.

Keywords: *mobile phone learning, English as a foreign language (EFL), perception, phenomenology*

Introduction

This study examines the students' perception on the use of mobile phones in EFL learning in the context of Nepal. Nowadays, the use of mobile phones is growing rapidly in every part of human life. Attewell and Savill-Smith (2004) say that the uses of mobile phones have grown to such an extent over recent years, and thus are gradually replacing personal computer in modern professional and social context. The

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teaching and learning process has also been highly influenced by mobile phones and this condition has led to change the traditional learning to mobile learning (Tiwari, 2019). These days, mobile phones are becoming an inevitable part of many students and teachers. They are being used to support teaching and learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. Using mobile phones, students can collect the learning materials, and communicate with their teachers and peers to learn something at anywhere without a time boundary (Jaradat, 2014). In such a case, it is contextual to observe the students' perception of the use of mobile phones in EFL learning.

The use of mobile phones in EFL learning has recently become a popular topic for ELT researchers across the world. Over the past twenty years, more than 345 mobile assisted language learning related works are carried out (Burston, 2013). Many studies have been carried out on this matter suggesting the mobile phone as a useful tool to facilitate in EFL learning. Begum (2011) has stated that cell phone has great potential as an instructional tool despite of some challenges that can be resolved by the sincere attempts of the authority, teachers and changing ethical points of view. Jaradat (2014) states that mobile phones can be adopted to enhance students' interaction and language learning experiences and it can be used anywhere or any time. In the same way, Vyas and Nirban (2014) in their research study state that mobile phones are significant medium for educational purposes and most of the students are ready to accept the mobile phone despite its limitations. Cakir (2015) mentions that mobile phones are effective mean for teaching EFL. Thus, it can be said that mobile phone can be taken as a useful learning tool for language practice.

In the context of a non-native country like Nepal, the teaching and learning of English is a very challenging task. The disparity between Nepali and English language, lack of sufficient exposure and dedication cause the task of learning English difficult in the context of Nepal. In such a case development of mobile phone has supported and made a little bit feasible on this task nowadays. Mobile phones serve some pedagogical functions not only inside the classroom but outside the classroom as well (Parajuli 2016). That is why, it still needs to look at whether mobile phones can perform as a better language learning tool or not.

Though the issue of mobile assisted language learning is not a new area of the study in the context of Nepal as well, there are a few research studies have been carried out on the spirit of using mobile phones in English as foreign language (EFL) learning. Shrestha (2011) wrote an article on the topic "The Potential of Mobile Technologies for (English) Language Learning in Nepal" indicating the significant role of mobile phones to enhance students' interaction and learning experiences in the English language. Similarly, Parajuli (2016) carried out research entitled "Mobile Learning Practice in Higher Education in Nepal" stating students' positive attitudes on

mobile learning. Tiwari (2019) carried out research study on 'Students' perception on the use of cell phone in EFL learning' to find out how secondary level of community schools' students use cell phone in their English learning in the context of Dhankuta. He mentioned that students have positive attitudes on using cell phone in EFL learning in the sense that most of the students agreed cell phone as a useful tool for learning English. Although there are few researchers on this matter, they have not yet addressed the issue of how the advanced level students perceiving the use of the mobile phone in their academic practice. Moreover, no phenomenological study has been carried out regarding the students' perception of the use of mobile phones so far in the context of Nepal. So, it is necessary to know how EFL students actually think about the use of cell phones in their EFL learning in the context of Nepal. This research problem triggers the researcher to explore the attitudes and perceptions of students on the use of smart phones in their EFL learning.

This study can provide information about how bachelor level students use the mobile phone in EFL learning that will be significant to policy makers in order to make a plan and policy regarding mobile assisted language learning. In the same way, as there are not any spaces provided for mobile learning in the present curriculum, it will be significant for all curriculum developers, syllabus designer and material developers in order to consider the space of mobile learning in the curriculum.

Methods and Materials

In this section, I lay the methodological groundwork for investigating the students' perception on the use of the mobile phone in the EFL context. The ontological consideration during my research was based on multiple realities. My ontological assumption was based on the perceptions of the students on the use of smart phones in learning EFL. So, I focused on the experience of the participants more. I believe that the nature of reality of learning English via smart phones is not objective reality rather it is interpretive, multiple, subjective that may be guided by an individual's beliefs, attitudes, background and dedication. Students' experiences of using mobile phones for learning English are varied and accordingly they might be different from my experience and understanding. Therefore, the ontology of my research paradigm is interpretive; there is no single reality behind the students' perception on the use of smart phones in learning the English language.

In this context, I produced knowledge through questions and interactions with participants. I believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday life and hence, they emerged from my participants' experience of using smart phones in the course of learning EFL. Thus, my epistemology was to construct knowledge from the experience of participants through questions and interaction. My

sources of knowledge were my research participants, their narratives and my critical self-reflection as well. In my research, the knowledge was constructed from shared information and perception.

This study is highly informed by phenomenological research design to investigate the experience of students on the use of mobile phones in EFL learning. A phenomenological approach is viewed as a 'highly appropriate' means to research human experience (Wimpenny & Gass 2000 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). Phenomenologists often identify that an understanding of life can emerge from an individual's life experiences. In this study, the exploration of the students' perception on the use of mobile phone in EFL learning would help to give meaning to the overall experience. This study has taken into account my experiences and reflections on them, as well as look to the experiences of others. Subsequently, this investigation adheres to a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective. This perspective is indicative of the fact that meanings are co-developed from the collective experience of being human in the world that we all live in (Byrne 2001 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). It also indicates that phenomenological meaning should emerge as 'a result of co-creation between the researcher and the researched.' (Wimpenny & Gass 2000 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). Phenomenology, after all, is mostly used to develop 'pathic' understanding (Annells 1999 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). The question was how do bachelor level students perceive the use of mobile phone in learning EFL?As such, I wanted to know whether my past experiences had mirrored or differed from those of others who were perceiving the use of mobile phone in EFL learning. A phenomenological approach enabled me to gain an understanding of what the participants' particular reality about the use of mobile phone in EFL learning in this study.

The sample of only six students was drawn from a bachelor of English education and interviewed from a telephone conversation to know their perception of the use of mobile phones in EFL learning due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The students have been studying B Ed. 4th year at Dhankuta Multiple Campus. The student sample was sampled purposively. Phenomenological samples are nearly always purposive (Clark, 1998 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). At this juncture, three students who had the facility of WIFI at their home and another three who had no facility of WIFI at his home and used the mobile data in the urgency are required to demonstrate a progressive level of critical discourse in the use of mobile phone in EFL learning.

Confidentiality was assured for all sample respondents saying their participations are voluntary. All students were informed of study aims, written consent was acquired and all were allowed to decline to take part in the study at any time. Students were offered access to the findings of this study if they so wished.

Data collection

It was anticipated that the lived experiences of the students would arise from the process of gathering experiential descriptions of the students' recollections of incidents and events in the course of EFL learning. A semi-structured interview was held with each student that was lasted approximately 25/30 minutes and recorded on audio tape. However, the interviewed was held again and again until the data was saturated. The emphasis was based purely on the students' experience. Brief notations were taken at the time of the conversations for memoing. An open-question 'funnel' technique was used for all of the interviews. This technique, described by Cohen and Manion (1989), starts the interview process with a broad range of general non-threatening questions that are designed to place the participants at ease in the initial stages. After the participants appear to have relaxed, the focus of further questions becomes more specific and knowledge-intensive. The nature of the questions asked generally centered around 'how did advance level students perceive the use of mobile phone in learning EFL? And 'what were their overall observed experiences on the use of mobile phone in EFL?

A manual analysis method was adopted where each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim into a word-processed format. The resultant transcripts were read and re-read alongside the accompanying notations that were taken at the time of the interviews, for emerging phenomena. Some phenomenological researchers advocate a step-by-step set of procedures to aid in the interpretation of phenomenological data. This particular study, alternatively, adopts the stance of (Van Manen, 1997 as cited in Whitehead, 2002;) who argues that the interpretation of phenomenological data is interpretative and should occur directly through the deliberate act of describing experiences in a written form. The adopted hermeneutic process sought to analyze and interpret the whole of the transcribed text of each student. Whole cases were compared with other whole cases to identify emerging themes of commonalities. When documenting these commonalities, one is describing a theory that explicates the 'shared' nature of the phenomena under investigation (Forbes, 1999 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). This shifting between whole cases aided in the revealing of new themes and helped to present a 'global picture' of the phenomena presented. Hermeneutical analysis, when combined with a Heideggerian approach to phenomenological description, demands that the researcher move beyond the superficial explanations of the experience that the transcribed text first offers (Robertson-Malt, 1996 as cited in Whitehead, 2002). The thematic analysis was designed to uncover meaning and promote understanding. The interpretation of arising themes involved closely scrutinizing the transcripts, studying other sources of literature and self-reflection of personal experience (Van Manen, 1984 as cited in Whitehead, 2002;). I moved between the data, the collected

literature, and my understanding until I had reached a meaningful interpretation of the experience of my participants. It was Heidegger (1962) who identified that it is the researcher's preconceptions that guide the interpretation. It should be mentioned that the 'trustworthiness' of the findings was assured by taking the transcribed data back to the original participants for confirmation. It was felt that the 'credibility' of the data was supported by the richness of description that emerged from the data (Corben 1999 as cited in Whitehead, 2002;).

Results and Discussion

In my study, my participants had said so many things about the use of mobile phone in EFL learning. From the analysis of the transcribed data the three themes were emerged. They are positive attitude on the use of mobile phone in EFL learning, needs of further guidance on the mobile assisted language learning, and need of reconsideration in the mobile network quality.

Positive attitude on the use of mobile phone in EFL learning

Students have positive attitude towards mobile assisted language learning. Students use various mobile apps to learn English language. Students have used various types of mobile apps such as off/online dictionary, you tube, google search, hello English, English grammar, what's app etc. to learn especially vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation and communication skills in their smart mobile phones. Different kinds of apps in mobile phones make students feel happy in learning English. The use of mobile phone helps students to understand the text quickly and easily. They can use different apps in the mobile phone again and again until they have fully understood the content unknown. That is the positive aspect of using mobile in EFL learning. Regarding this, one of my informants said, "I use different mobile apps to learn the same content better that makes me happy and spur me to use the mobile phone again and again". Different mobile apps encourage learners to learn language (Attewell, 2005). It simply implies that students feel happy to learn EFL using different types of mobile apps.

Mobile phone is taken as a useful tool for EFL learning. Mobile phone can be used anytime and anyplace if it is needed to learn something or it can be used either inside or outside the classroom Parajuli (2016). Mobile phone is helpful to utilize the leisure time in learning English. It can be used to solve the language related problems immediately (Tiwari, 2019). It can be used in the students' own time. Unclear subject matters can be cleared by repeating them again and again in the mobile phone. In this context one participant said, "I am positive in using mobile phone because it helps me to be clear over the unclear subject matter." It indicates that mobile phone can be

a useful tool for students. Sometimes student have used mobile data in the absence of WIFI connectivity to learn EFL. It implies that the mobile phone can be a useful learning tool for students of EFL (Jaradat, 2014).

From the above illustrations, it can be said that students have a positive attitude on the use of mobile phone in EFL learning. Vyas and Nirban (2014) in their study 'Students' Perception on the Effectiveness of Mobile Learning in an Institutional Context' stated that majority of the respondents consider mobile technology as a significant medium for educational purposes and most of them are ready to accept the mobile learning positively despite the limitations. Similarly, Parajuli (2016) in his study 'Mobile Learning Practice in Higher Education in Nepal' stated that virtually all undergraduates possessed their mobile phones and used them informally for learning both inside and outside of their classes. The majority of the students had positive attitudes on mobile learning. In this context, my theme is more likely to be in the line of these themes.

Need of Further Guidance on the Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

There is a lack of appropriate support in the use of mobile phones while learning EFL. It is difficult to find all types of documents in the mobile phone. There is no opportunity to be clear in case of the unclear subject matter. It is difficult to understand the whole text in the mobile phones in such a case no one can illustrate that text. There is no facility of learning through discussion in the mobile phone. At this juncture, no one can help the learner understand the text. Moreover, it is difficult to find all type of materials needed. Regarding this, one of my participants said, "It is difficult to get all type of information required from mobile phones. No one can help at this juncture." Thus, there are so many needs of appropriate support to students on the use of mobile phone while learning EFL through mobile phones. The mobile phone has great potential as an instructional tool despite of some challenges that can be resolved by the sincere attempts of the authority, teachers and changing ethical points of view (Begum, 2011).

There is the necessity of training for mobile- assisted language learning. Students don't have sufficient idea on operating and downloading different kinds of mobile apps. As result, students could not learn even if they wish to learn the English language more. The students are not very much familiar with the different search engines to get authentic information. In this context, the experience of one student is, "It would be better to get idea about how to operate and download various apps of learning English and had better to get ideas of using different search engines." It implies that students have keen interest to learn about the different search engines in order to improve their English language proficiency. Most of the students expect detail

information about the use of mobile apps to improve their English. So, the students should be given training about the installation and operation of different types of mobile apps and search engines.

From the above discussion, it can be said that there is strong need of guidance while using mobile phone by students for EFL learning. Students should be provided the support of mentors and training for learning English effectively through mobile apps. Students are of the opinion that it is not easy to find the topics they want to know and difficult to comprehend the meanings of all text in the mobile apps. They could not get all the information they required and no one could illustrate the topic as they felt difficult. They said there is no facility to have discussion while they are in difficulties in mobile phone learning. They are not familiar about various search engines for learning English. So it is necessary to provide further guidance on the mobile assisted language learning. Students would like to make use of mobile phones for educational purposes if they are provided sufficient guidance (Vyas and Nirban, 2014).

Need of Consideration in the Mobile Network Quality

There should be cheap and best mobile network facility. All students do not have the access of WIFI facility at all the time. Sometimes, students have to use mobile data as well. In such a case, mobile data seems to be costly for the students. Regarding this, one participant shared his idea, "There is no facility of WIFI in my home. So, I must use mobile data at urgency but mobile data is costly for me." It implies that mobile data is expensive for students. Not only that, mobile network quality is not good enough. Students expect the good and reliable mobile network quality. So, the cheap and best mobile network is essential for learning EFL through mobile network.

There should be good internet quality for EFL learning. Most of the students feel the poor quality of internet while using mobile phones for learning EFL. It takes nearly longer time to see the required text in the mobile phone due to the poor internet quality. One of my participant said, "Learning the text through mobile is fine but we have to wait again and again to see the short text due to the poor network quality." It also indicates the shortcomings of internet quality. All students expect the further improvement of network quality for the effective learning of EFL. So, the network quality must be good for EFL learning through mobile phones.

From the above statements it can be said that there should be reconsideration in the quality of mobile network which is one of the themes of my study. It would be better to have cheap and best network facility and good management either in mobile network or internet quality for effective EFL learning through mobile phones. It simply implies that the existing condition of network quality is not likely to be

good, that's why it is necessary to improve it. Most of the students like to use mobile phones but teachers are not ready o facilitate them about their problem while using phones (Suleiman, 2011 as cited in Tiwar, 2019).

It appears that students' perception regarding the use of mobile phone in EFL learning seemed to be positive despite its some limitations (Vyas and Nirban, 2014). The processes of operating and understanding of mobiles apps for learning English in particular demand a higher-level of understanding in the mobile users. I would argue, from my own mobile using in EFL encounters that difficulty in well understanding of English text is a common phenomenon in learning EFL. The students perceived mobile phone as a useful tool for language learning which helped them to learn language with the full exploitation of new technologies. Similarly, all participants argued that mobile phones can be utilized to learn the vocabulary more. They believed that use of their mobile dictionary, playing different vocabulary games or puzzles, listening to English communication skills help them to develop their vocabulary power. Likewise, all the participants assumed that their pronunciation had been increased because of proper utilization of mobile phone. In the same way, all the participants responded that they are also incorporating different features of mobile phone which helped them to boost up their grammatical accuracy. They perceive mobile phone positively in EFL learning despite its some challenges (Begum 2011).

The students' experiences often indicated that there is a problem of quality and reliability of network either in WIFI or mobile data. The experience of poor network quality is another obstacle for effective EFL learning through mobile phone. None of the students said that they have good network quality. In some cases, learning through mobile phone itself becomes slow and difficult process rather than the face to face teaching. Sometimes students were unsure if they were improving their skills or not through the use of mobile phone. I can identify personally with the participants' views that learning EFL through mobile phone is not easy and automatic but challenging as well. One of the other reasons why the students felt inconvenient in the use of mobile phone in EFL learning in this study reported that they have no teacher or mentor and guidelines to discuss the difficult things while they were facing difficulties in learning EFL through mobile phone. Thus, the students feel few difficulties in the quality and reliability of network.

Conclusion

This article has explored the attitude of students on the use of mobile phone in their learning English in the context of Nepal. This study has highlighted the students' positive perception on the use of mobile phone in EFL learning despite its minor challenge (Begum 2011). Students have used various features and functions of mobile

phone in order to develop different aspects and skills of English language such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, communication skill. Most of the students use the mobile dictionary, different search engines, internet browsers, YouTube, videos, downloaded learning materials and so on to learn English. It can be inferred that mobile phone can be an effective means of English language learning for the students. However, students feel some challenges in using mobile phone in learning EFL. Particularly they found difficultly in well understanding of text in the mobile phone and they felt the lack of support and needs of training for mobile assisted language learning. It would be better to provide sufficient guidelines in using mobile phones and to have cheap and best mobile network facility for learning English. It can be claimed that mobile phone can serve as a useful language learning tool if it is utilized properly for specific purposes. All curriculum developers, syllabus designer and policy makers should make a plan and policy regarding mobile assisted English language learning in the present curriculum.

Learning English through mobile phone is considered to be good way, however, it may not be perceived as a natural way of learning language due to its some challenges. It can be suggested that such type of unfavorable circumstances should be narrowed down and students should be encouraged more actively to learn EFL through mobile phone and to promote creative thinking to overcome their difficulties in understanding. Consideration of its challenges enhances the effectiveness of EFL learning through mobile phones. It is hoped that this paper can contribute to the further development of mobile assisted language learning.

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