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Mobile Apps and EFL Writing Practices among Algerian University Students: Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Shift

Somia Hammadi*

*University of Hassiba Ben Bouali, Chlef, Algeria

Email: s.hammadi90@univ-chlef.dz

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Abstract

This research is an attempt to examine EFL students' mobile apps use for writing purposes for first year English as a Foreign Language learners (EFL) at the Annex High Training College of Teachers (Chlef). The rapid expansion of mobile technology has transformed how university students interact, read, and write, and writing related apps have become common tools for text revision, ideas generation, grammar checking, and vocabulary lookup. A self-administered questionnaire with 40 undergraduate EFL students was employed as the main data collection method to obtain relevant information regarding applications frequency of use, preferred applications, perceived benefits, and challenges associated with mobile apps use for writing. The findings suggest that mobile apps can support writing development when their use is integrated critically and systematically. Ultimately, the study highlights the role of access, digital literacy, and teacher guidance in determining whether mobile tools function as meaningful learning aids or merely convenient shortcuts.

Keywords: Mobile apps, writing, EFL students, opportunities, challenges.

1. Introduction

Smartphones are no longer used only for communication and entertainment; but rather, they are nowadays used by a large number of students as effective tools for brainstorming ideas, checking grammar accuracy, and translating vocabulary. In EFL context, this shift is particularly significant since students often need extra support outside the classroom to develop writing accuracy and confidence. Mobile apps can fill part of this gap by offering immediate feedback and convenient access to language resources. As Chapelle (2001) explains, technology and language use are now

deeply intertwined in the twenty-first century, making technology- assisted learning an essential part of applied linguistics. In the same vein, Korkmaz (2010) confirms, "With the emergence and rapid improvement of small, portable notebook computers, for instance, the concept of "mobile learning" has gained popularity."

In Algeria, where English is increasingly valued for academic and professional purposes, the use of mobile apps has become part of everyday student life. Lahmer (2021), in her study, reports that Algerian university students hold positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of mobile learning. This finding suggests that learners perceived mobile learning as a beneficial and supportive tool for their language development. The results highlight the potential of integrating mobile learning into EFL instruction at the university level. Many learners already rely on digital tools informally, but the educational value of those tools depends on how they are used. A smartphone alone does not improve writing, rather, the quality of use, the learner's digital literacy, and the teachers' pedagogical guidance determine whether mobile technology supports learning meaningfully.

The present study investigates mobile apps use for writing practices among EFL Algerian university students of Chlef. More specifically, it focuses on four important areas: frequency of use, preferred apps, perceived benefits, and common challenges. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How frequently do Algerian EFL university students use mobile applications for writing practice?
2. Which mobile applications are most commonly used for EFL writing?
3. What perceived benefits do students associate with these applications?
4. What challenges or barriers limit effective use of mobile apps for writing?

The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of literature on mobile apps use for EFL writing and their limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Technology has transformed the field of English language education, bringing major changes to how teaching and learning take place. In this context, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has emerged as an innovative and influential approach to support language learning in a flexible and accessible ways (Alnujaidi,2021). MALL is best defined as "formal or informal learning mediated via handheld devices which are potentially available for use any time, anywhere". (Kukulska-Hulme& Sheild, 2008). Chinnery et al. (2006) states that these technologies provide a number of "authentic", "relevant", and "contextual" language learning experiences. In the same vein, Kukulska and Hulme (2010) contends that MALL provide online environments for learning within a community and

sharing sources with others, providing immediate and flexible ways of acquiring a new language. MALL enables learners to access instructional materials, complete language tasks, interact with peers and teachers, and receive immediate feedback outside conventional classroom boundaries.

In education, MALL can be in forms of social networking websites and mobile applications (e.g: Facebook, Twitter, and You tube), podcasts (Apple podcast, Spotify, Soundcloud), learning management systems (LMS like Moodle, Schoology, Google Classroom, and Blackboard).

MALL has become increasingly widespread, the need for effective design approaches has grown correspondingly. Researchers have noted a shortage of coherent theoretical frameworks to guide the design of mobile learning experiences (Cochrance, 2012; Sharples et al., 2009). Prior investigations have identified multiple considerations for creating effective mobile assisted language learning content, including learner context, device constraints, and activity structure (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2013; Parsons, Ryu, & Cranshaw, 2007; Quinn, 2013).

Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2015) and Laurillard (2013) identified a pedagogical framework to better understand the mechanisms of mobile learning (see figure 1 below).

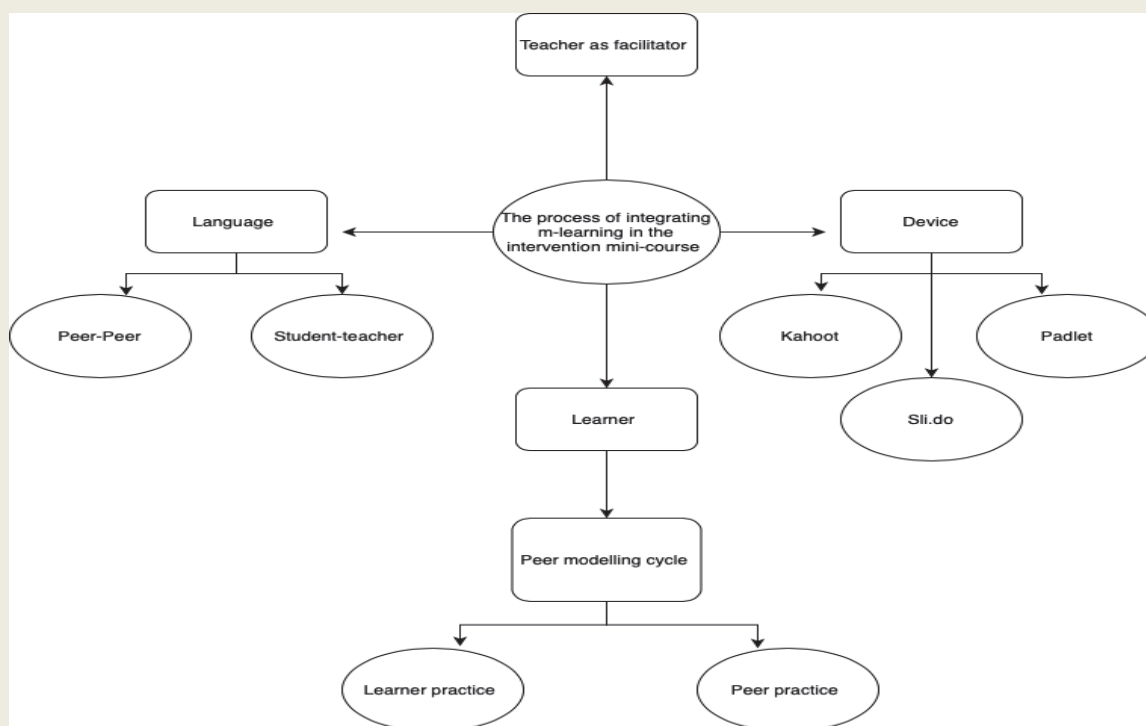


Figure 1. Pedagogical frameworks for effective use of m-learning (Kukulska-Hulmes et al., 2015 and Laurillard, 2013)

Despite these benefits, concerns persist. Many educators criticize smartphones for their potential to distract students during lessons, as a result, some institutions ban or heavily restrict their use. Additional risks identified in the literature include academic dishonesty during assessments when students have unsupervised access to devices, and inequities stemming from unequal device

ownership or varying data connectivity. These drawbacks have prompted policies and classroom management strategies that limit unsupervised smartphone use (Boudjelal, 2022).

2.2 EFL Writing in Algerian University Context

Writing is one of the four English skills. It is a productive skill which is “highly sophisticated combining a number of diverse elements, only some of which are strictly linguistic” (Dastgoshadeh et al., 2011.p252). Students are required to master the writing skill if they truly want to be competent users of any language. Researchers have meticulously tried to design educational programs to help learners develop and enhance their writing skills. (Tang et al, 2023).

Before delving deeply examining research on EFL writing in Algeria, it is safer to consider the writing pedagogy adopted in the national system. Algerian schools have generally embraced competency-based, task-centered, and outcome-based approaches across the primary, middle, and secondary levels in order to teach English more effectively (Bourouba, 2012). Within this framework, writing is taught as part of the English course, and its teaching is often shaped by a product-oriented view of writing. According to Bourouba (2012), the emphasis is placed on producing coherent texts through the use of appropriate vocabulary, grammar, connectors, and paragraph organization, including topic sentences, supporting details, transitional sentences, and concluding sentences. Yet, students at secondary level rarely have enough time to practice writing in depth. Bourouba (2012) observed that many students are unfamiliar with writing genres and do not know how language choices vary according to genre and purpose. In many classrooms, students are asked to write without receiving sufficient models, explicit instruction, or guidance in planning their texts. For this reason, teaching writing and designing writing tasks are among the most demanding responsibilities for EFL teachers in Algeria.

Research in the Algerian EFL context shows that writing difficulties are linked not only to learner weaknesses but also to instructional practices and curriculum design.

Several Algerian studies have examined these issues. Boucherfa (2015) analyzed students’ written work, classroom observations, and syllabi in order to identify the sources of writing problems among university learners. The results showed that students experienced difficulties not only with mechanics and layout, but also with idea development, organization, and topic focus. Boucherfa (2015) therefore recommended revising the syllabus and integrating reading and writing in a more coherent way. Another important contribution is Bouyakoub’s (2015) study on the causes of writing difficulties among first year EFL students. The study showed that students struggled to produce quality paragraphs because of inadequate approach to writing instruction, limited practice time and weak coordination between writing and other language courses. Her findings suggest that these deficiencies must be addressed if students are to improve their writing proficiency. Large sized

classes in FL contexts also tend to influence writing instruction (Reichelt et al., 2012), which makes Algeria not an exception. Zekri et al. (2024) found that the students' number is a challenge for giving individual feedback on multiple submitted drafts.

Overall, the Algerian EFL context reveals a persistent need for stronger writing pedagogy, more time for practice, clearer curricular coordination, and greater emphasis on process-oriented instruction.

2.3 Mobile Apps and EFL Writing in the Algerian Context

Mobile learning has increasingly attracted attention as a means of strengthening EFL academic literacy, especially in the areas of reading and writing. Although the field is still developing, existing studies offer promising evidence that mobile technologies can support literacy development by extending learning beyond classroom boundaries and creating more flexible opportunities for practice, feedback, and interaction (Hazaea & Alzubi, 2016). Research has also shown that mobile learning can contribute to the improvement of EFL writing performance through tools and activities that encourage drafting, revising, collaboration, and learner autonomy (Tursina et al., 2021; Oflaz et al., 2022).

The integration of technology into writing instruction is not simply a matter of using digital tools; rather, it involves designing learning experiences that combine pedagogical goals with technological affordances. In this context, Hicks (2009) argues that effective digital writing instruction had better center on authentic writing objectives and real audiences. In other words, technology should not dominate the writing process, but should instead support meaningful expression and student engagement. This approach encourages students to see writing as a social and communicative act rather than as a mechanical exercise.

In the Algerian EFL context, technology integration has been promoted as part of broader educational reform efforts aimed at improving teaching and learning in higher education (Reziz, 2011; Amrate, 2018). Previous studies in Algeria have focused mainly on receptive skills, especially vocabulary development through films and videos and listening comprehension through audio recordings and music, while the use of technology for productive skills such as writing and speaking has remained limited (Bedjou, 2006; Mami, 2013; Amrate, 2018). This limitation has often been linked to insufficient training for both teachers and learners, which reduces the extent to which technology can be meaningfully incorporated into writing pedagogy (Amrate, 2018).

Didouh et al. (2025) investigated teachers' opinions about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve writing task instruction and found generally positive perceptions of its usefulness for writing development. In parallel, Mansouri (2017) examined the use of weblogs in Algerian EFL creative writing and reported that blogging supported students' writing development by making the writing

process more interactive, motivating learners to write outside the classroom, and encouraging peer feedback, collaboration, and revision. These findings suggest that digital tools can improve writing when they are integrated into collaborative and process-oriented activities rather than used only for content delivery.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Instrument

This study uses a descriptive questionnaire- based design. Questionnaire research is appropriate here as the objective is to capture students' habits and perceptions in a standardized way. Initially, there was hesitation in selecting between the questionnaire and semi-structured interview; however, the questionnaire was ultimately chosen, drawing upon the rationale advanced by Cohen et al. (2007) who argue that "the advantages of the questionnaire over interviews, for instance, are: it tends to be more reliable because it is anonymous, it encourages greater honesty, it is more economical than the interview in terms of time and money." The questionnaire was administered in the presence of the researcher in order to address any queries or uncertainties immediately and ensure a good response rate.

3.2 Participants

A total of 40 first -year EFL students (37 females,03 males) from the Department of English at the Annex High Training College of Teachers, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef were selected as participants for this study in the academic year 2025-2026. This population is relevant because such students are expected to write frequently in English and are likely to use digital tools as part of their learning routine.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

Validity is an important key to effective research. It is supported when the items measure the intended constructs. Cohen et al. (2007) note, "in quantitative data validity might be improved through careful sampling, appropriate instrumentation and appropriate statistical treatments of the data." While reliability is strengthened when the items produce consistent responses across similar respondents and situations. A first version of the questionnaire was piloted before full administration in order to check clarity, relevance and time needed for completion.

4. Data Analysis

As dictated by the questionnaire's structure, the direct, closed-ended items were analysed quantitatively, while the open-ended questions were examined descriptively. Combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis offers a more comprehensive understanding of research phenomena. Quantitative data provide measurable patterns and generalizable trends, while qualitative data enrich these findings with meaning and depth.

5. Findings

5.1 Frequency of Mobile Apps Use for Writing Practice

Usage frequency	percentage
Daily	80%
weekly	15%
Rarely/never	5%

Table 1. Frequency of Mobile Apps Use for Writing Practice

The data on the frequency of mobile apps use for writing practice show a predominantly daily usage pattern among participants. Specifically, 80% of respondents reported using mobile apps for writing practice on a daily basis, indicating a high level of integration of these tools into their regular writing routines. A smaller proportion (represented by 15%), indicated weekly usage, while only 5% reported rarely or never using mobile apps for the purpose of writing in English.

5.2 Most Common Mobile Apps Used for Writing

Apps Used	Respondents
Grammarly	70%
Microsoft Word Mobile	40%
Google Docs	45%
Google Translate	60%
ChatGPT	75%
Other Apps	20%

Table 2. Most Commonly Used Apps

The analysis of the most frequently used apps for writing practice highlights a preference for a diverse set of tools, with some apps dominating. ChatGPT emerged as the most popular app, with 75% of students reporting its use for writing practice, followed closely by Grammarly at 70%. Google Translate was the third most common, utilized by 60% of the students. Google Docs was used by 45% and Microsoft Word Mobile by 40%. 20% reported using other apps (such as Gemini, Quill Bot, Claude AI).

5.3 Perceived Benefits of Mobile Apps for Writing

Benefit	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Improve grammar knowledge	00%	00%	5%	67.5%	27.5%
Improve vocabulary	00%	00%	7.5%	37.5%	55%

Benefit	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Improve accuracy	00%	00%	2.5%	82.5%	15%
Increase motivation	00%	00%	5%	67.5%	27.5%
Save time	00%	00%	00%	90%	10%

Table 3. Benefits of Mobile Apps for Writing

The results show a clearly optimistic perception of the benefits of mobile apps for writing instruction. 95% of the respondents reported that it enhanced their grammar knowledge, combining 67.5% agreement and 27.5% strongly agreement, whereas only 5% remained neutral. In parallel, most participants agreed or strongly agreed that it helped enhance vocabulary, with 55% selecting "strongly agree" and 37.5% selecting "agree", while only 7.5% remained neutral. Regarding accuracy, the results were even more favorable, as 82.5% agreed and 15% strongly agreed that mobile apps improved their accuracy, with only 2.5% expressing neutrality. In addition, participants expressed strong motivational gains, since 67.5% agreed and 27.5% strongly agreed that the use of mobile apps increased their motivation, while 5% gave a neutral response and no negative responses were recorded.

The most notable result concerns time-saving, as 90% of respondents agreed and 10% strongly agreed that using mobile apps saved time.

5.4 Main Challenges in Using Mobile Apps

Challenges	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Internet access limit use	00%	00%	05%	61%	34%
Need guidance	00%	06%	15%	55%	24%
Overdependence on apps	00%	08%	24%	48%	20%
Explanations are difficult	00%	20%	20%	30%	30%
Distraction and reduced attention span	00%	20%	15%	25%	20%

Table 4. Main Challenges Encountered

Table 4 shows that the most frequently encountered challenge was limited access to the internet, with 61% of the respondents agreeing and 34% strongly agreeing, indicating that access-related constraints still affect use to a large extent. Another notable concern was the need for guidance on how to use mobile apps for writing practices, reported by 55% as agree and another 24% as strongly agree. Similarly, overdependence on these apps was identified by a considerable number of the respondents, with 48% agreeing and 20% strongly agreeing. The challenge related to difficult

explanations received more moderate responses, with 20% disagreeing, 20% neutral, 30% agreeing, and 30% strongly agreeing. 25% agreed that mobile apps caused distraction and reduced attention span, while 20% strongly agreed with this statement.

5.5 Students Opinions on:

5.4.1 Other Advantages of Mobile Apps for Writing

Besides mastering grammar, vocabulary, and accuracy; increasing motivation and saving time, students reported several additional benefits of mobile apps for writing. 55% remarked that mobile apps help reduce the stress often associated with writing practices, as the digital environment gives them a sense of support. 35% noted that mobile apps support self-editing by allowing them to revise and refine their drafts independently and at their own pace. 20% indicated that these apps help them generate ideas more easily, which is particularly useful at the drafting phase when students may struggle to brainstorm a topic.

5.4.2 Other Challenges of Using Mobile Apps for Writing

The students' responses point to several other challenges encountered when writing in English. 55% of the respondents reported that writing in English requires more sustained concentration and confidence compared to writing in L1 (Arabic) even with the use of mobile apps. In addition, 20% reported that, although the apps are helpful, they do not always suit the specific demand of a writing task, especially when the assignments require personal reflection or creativity.

6. Discussion

The findings suggest that mobile apps are widely used by EFL students in Algeria to complete their writing assignments. The frequent use of these apps suggests that students no longer view mobiles as communication or optional tools, but rather as practical companions in completing writing tasks. In other words, students appear to rely on these apps (mainly Chat GPT, Grammarly, and Google Translate) when planning, drafting, and refining their work.

One of the most notable results is the range of benefits students associate with these apps. Many students stated that mobile apps save time, increase motivation, and improve accuracy, grammar, and vocabulary. These perceptions suggest that the apps help students move through writing tasks with greater confidence and less hesitation. This aligns with Mansouri (2017) who reported that digital tools can improve students' writing skills and Karpovea (2020); Tursina et al. (2021); and Oflaz et al., (2020) who contend that mobile learning can contribute the improvement of EFL writing performance through tools and tasks that encourage drafting, revising, collaboration and learner autonomy. At the same time, the fact that students also reported reduced stress and greater autonomy is important, because this means that the apps do more than correct language; they further create a more supportive environment in which learners can refine their texts independently.

This stands as a confirmation of Li and Hegelheimer (2013) statement that MALL plays a significant role in developing students' ability to self-edit their own pieces of writing. However, the findings also suggest that this support is not equally available to all students. Limited internet access remains a significant obstacle, creating unequal opportunities among students. When some learners cannot access the internet consistently, the promise of digital support becomes uneven and potentially unfair.

Beyond access, the study also reveals a more pedagogical concern: overdependence on mobile apps. Although these tools can assist students, excessive reliance may weaken their willingness to engage cognitively with the writing task. Instead of planning and revising ideas independently, some students may simply accept apps suggestions without deep reflection. This is a crucial point because writing development requires not only external support, but also the learner's own linguistic and intellectual effort.

The students' responses also show that mobile apps do not always provide explanations that are easy to understand. This explains why teacher guidance remain necessary. Without pedagogical support, students may struggle to transform app-based suggestions into real writing improvement.

Another important insight is that mobile apps do not always suit the specific demands of writing tasks, especially when those tasks require reflection, creativity, and sustained concentration. Writing is not a purely mechanical act, but rather, a cognitive process that requires concentration from the part of the learner. While apps can support surface-level correction, they cannot fully replace the deeper thinking that good writing requires. This makes it clear that mobile apps should be seen as complementary tools rather than complete solutions. This supports Mahendran (2012) who sees writing as "the creation of original text using the individual's intellectual and linguistic resources rather than copying one's text."(p.206).

Finally, the findings point to distraction and reduced attention span as further challenges linked to writing through mobile apps. Since these tools are used on devices that also host numerous other functions and notifications, students may find it harder to maintain sustained focus. This reinforces the idea that mobile writing practice needs structure and supervision. The results therefore suggest that teacher guidance remains essential, not because students cannot benefit from apps on their own, but because guided use helps them stay focused, purposeful, and academically engaged.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that mobile apps have become deeply embedded in EFL students writing practices. The results indicate that students value these apps for the practical support they provide throughout the writing process, particularly in helping them work more independently and

efficiently. In this sense, mobile apps appear to function as meaningful writing companions that respond to students' immediate academic needs.

At the same time, the findings also reveal that the use of these tools is not without limitations. Despite myriad benefits, challenges persist. Unequal access to the internet, the risk of overdependence, the difficulty of interpreting some explanations, and the problem of distraction all show that mobile apps cannot fully replace the cognitive effort required for effective writing. Writing in English still demands reflection, organization, creativity, and sustained concentration, which means that digital support alone is not enough to ensure strong written performance. Overall, the study highlights the need for a balanced pedagogical approach in which mobile apps are integrated thoughtfully into writing instruction.

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