

# Using Mobile Learning to Enhance Synthesis Writing Skills: A Review of The Advantages and Challenges

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**Abstract:** The significance of reading and writing skills in the educational context cannot be overstated. Within tertiary education, the proficiency in comprehending multiple sources and engaging in synthesis writing is deemed essential. Synthesis writing goes beyond the conventional "reading-then-writing" process, demanding students to skillfully select, organize, and integrate information obtained from a variety of texts. However, despite its importance, students often encounter difficulties when attempting to master this complex task. As the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the educational landscape, necessitating a shift towards remote teaching and learning, it is crucial to explore alternative strategies to address challenges in language learning. One such approach is mobile learning, which has gained global popularity, including in Malaysia, as a result of the widespread adoption of device applications. Mobile learning has the potential to augment learning engagement, foster collaborative learning environments, and provide convenient accessibility. Nevertheless, the implementation of mobile learning is not without obstacles. This paper aims to examine both the advantages and challenges associated with leveraging mobile learning as a means to improve synthesis writing skills, offering valuable insights into the viability of this pedagogical approach.

**Keywords:** *advantages, challenges, MALL, mobile learning, synthesis writing.*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the widespread adoption of online platforms for education globally (Saikat et al., 2021). In Malaysia, mobile learning, which integrates mobile devices and applications in ESL classrooms, has gained significant traction (Fariza & Mohd Razali, 2021). However, there is limited research specifically focusing on synthesis writing skills (Stalin & Tan, 2020). Malaysian learners face challenges in developing writing skills, particularly in ESL contexts (Chandran et al., 2019). Integrating technology, such as mobile learning, shows potential for enhancing language skills, including writing (Thandavaraj et al., 2021). This paper aims to explore the advantages and challenges of implementing mobile learning to improve synthesis writing skills.

### *Definition of Mobile Learning*

Mobile learning, or M-learning, is an instructional approach that integrates mobile technology in education (Fariza & Mohd Razali, 2021). It encompasses various forms, including Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and the use of Social Network Sites (SNS) in ESL classrooms. Mobile

learning involves the incorporation of diverse mobile devices such as PDAs, mobile phones, tablets, and more (Çakmak, 2019). It also utilizes applications like Kahoots, Padlet, Quizzes, and social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat (Çakmak, 2019). This approach enables learners to engage in educational activities independently of time and location (Sönmez et al., 2018). Essentially, mobile learning delivers relevant information to learners through internet-based services.

### *Definition of Synthesis Writing*

Synthesis writing involves three salient processes of selecting, organizing and connecting information from multiple source texts to construct a new text (Spivey & King, 1989). In the first process, selecting, the writer will have to decide on which information should be chosen from each text. In the second process, organizing, the writer will have to organize the text ideas based on relationships within the information chosen (Spivey, 1991). In the third process, connecting, the writer will have to link and integrate information from the different texts to construct a new text. A well synthesized text requires the writer to be engaged in all three processes of selecting, organizing and connecting, which is rarely achieved by tertiary education students.

### **Challenges of Synthesis Writing Skills**

The production of inadequate synthesis essays by most tertiary education students can be attributed to their ineffective utilization of synthesis writing strategies (Barks & Watts, 2001; Dovey, 2010; Krishnan & Kathpalia, 2002). Their writing lacks efficacy because they fail to engage in the fundamental processes of synthesis writing, namely, selection, organization, and connection of information from multiple source texts, which constitute the essence of synthesis writing (Spivey & King, 1989).

Teaching synthesis writing in academic writing courses presents several challenges, as reported in a review by Grabe and Zhang (2013). Second language learners of English encounter a range of difficulties in synthesis writing stemming from inadequate proficiency and fluency in reading and writing, as well as a lack of background knowledge and experience in synthesis writing, which entails extensive reading and inferencing. These problems are also prevalent in the Malaysian context, where students demonstrate inadequate knowledge of synthesis writing conventions (Zaki & Md Yunus, 2015), insufficient training in logical thinking skills (Lai, 2010), and limited proficiency in expressing ideas in English (Zaki & Md Yunus, 2015; Adi Badiozaman, 2017; Ratnawati et al., 2018). Furthermore, time constraints on the part of teachers hinder their ability to provide immediate meaningful feedback or instruction to enhance students' synthesis writing skills (Zaki & Md Yunus, 2015).

### **The Features of Mobile Learning**

Mobile learning offers personalized, flexible, collaborative, and interactive learning experiences (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019). It is characterized by portability, omnipresence, interactivity, user-friendliness, and engagement (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019). Additionally, mobile learning incorporates features like microlearning, spaced repetition, gamification, and social learning (Jahnke, 2020; Florian Schimanke, 2021; Boyinbode, 2018). Microlearning allows for convenient and concise information assimilation, while spaced repetition aids in long-term knowledge retention (Jahnke, 2020; Florian Schimanke, 2021). Gamification motivates learners and enhances engagement, particularly in writing practices (Boyinbode,

2018). Leveraging social media platforms enables collaborative learning and feedback exchange, further improving writing skills (Boyinbode, 2018). Mobile learning enables self-directed learning, unrestricted by time and location, fostering a stress-free environment for students to enhance their writing skills (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019).

### **The Advantages of Mobile Learning**

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era has witnessed the integration of technology in educational practices, necessitating educators and learners to adapt to contemporary technologies (Al Arif et al., 2022). This paper explores the impact of mobile learning on engagement, accessibility, interest, and collaborative learning in language education.

#### *Enhancing Engagement and Interest in Learning*

The use of web 2.0 technologies is crucial to captivate students' interest in writing, as mobile devices have become increasingly appealing to the current generation of students (Tolstoukhova et al., 2019). Ahsin and Rahmawati (2020) argue that a comprehensive understanding of play can indirectly enhance students' learning motivation and engagement. Consequently, integrating technological tools, such as Padlet, as an engagement tool can significantly improve students' writing skills (Al Arif et al., 2022). Pre-writing activities using Padlet enable students to visually organize their ideas before composing their written work.

#### *Easy Accessibility and Convenience of Mobile Learning*

Mobile phones, with their user-friendly applications, facilitate communication and learning convenience (Deris & Shukor, 2019). Students find the flexibility of mobile apps for language learning appealing, as they can access these apps anytime and anywhere (Rosell, 2020). Utilizing social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, enables students to be exposed to target language input and interact with native speakers, thereby improving their writing skills (Rosell, 2020; Taskiran et al., 2018). The accessibility and convenience of mobile learning apps empower students to engage in self-paced learning, promoting efficiency and time-saving advantages.

#### *Piquing Interest and Increasing Motivation*

Incorporating user-friendly applications into online learning environments sparks students' interest and motivation (Aryuntini, 2018). Writing skills are essential for language proficiency, requiring knowledge of grammar, idioms, and vocabulary (Aryuntini, 2018; Raimes, 1983). VideoScribe, a whiteboard animation software, serves as a valuable tool for improving students' writing skills, as it facilitates easy creation and submission of assignments (Aryuntini, 2018). By employing VideoScribe, students can actively engage with content, leading to improved understanding, motivation, and attention (Sudana, 2021). Mobile language learning, supported by VideoScribe, proves to be an effective method for teaching complex writing skills (Almatiana, 2021). The visual and interactive nature of VideoScribe animations fosters students' confidence and enhances their perception of learning the English language.

#### *Enhancing Collaborative Learning*

Mobile learning provides extensive possibilities for collaborative learning, leveraging the

widespread availability of mobile devices and wireless technology (Aghajani & Adlo, 2018; Chatterjee & Correia, 2020). Cooperative learning, characterized by problem-solving, idea exchange, and shared responsibility, benefits from the integration of online platforms such as Telegram (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018). Telegram encourages collaboration, creativity, and competitiveness among learners, leading to improved writing skills (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018). Moreover, the integration of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), including Facebook and Twitter, in mobile language learning fosters language acquisition opportunities and enhances writing skills (Taskiran et al., 2018; Fithriani et al., 2019). These platforms enable learners to engage in target language interaction, promoting participation in class discussions and overall language skill development.

## **The Challenges of Utilising Mobile Learning**

### *Physical and Technical Limitations*

The growth of mobile technologies poses challenges for mobile language learning (Demir & Akpınar, 2018). The small screen size of mobile devices hinders effective learning (Sam & Shalini, 2021). The small screen size of mobile devices can impede the writing process in mobile language learning. Additionally, limited internet data and storage capacity impact the quality of learning, leading to slow processing speeds and data corruption (Sam & Shalini, 2022).

### *Readiness of Teachers and Learners to Adapt to Mobile Learning*

Writing is often a challenging task for students, who may lack interest and motivation (Yuk et al., 2019). The readiness to adopt mobile learning, which involves using mobile devices in the classroom, is a significant hurdle (Christensen & Knezek, 2018). Older educators and primary learners face difficulties in adapting to mobile learning technology, and preparing resources for mobile learning is time-consuming (Mena, Singh & Clarke, 2020). While applications like Edmodo, Facebook, and Instagram support paragraph writing and simple phrases, the full potential of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and social networking site (SNS) applications in enhancing sentence and paragraph construction remains unexplored if both teachers and learners are reluctant to utilize them (Mena, Singh & Clarke, 2020).

### *Distractive Advertisements*

Distraction, defined as deviation from important content to less important content, poses challenges in mobile-assisted learning (Peter & Bijik, 2018). Students' ability to easily switch between applications makes it difficult for teachers to control their engagement and participation (Yilan & Koruyan, 2020). Some students admit to forgetting assigned tasks due to engagement with other online platforms (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018), while others resort to switching to texting and gaming platforms to combat boredom (Jalil & Sabir, 2019). Advertisements encountered in educational applications also contribute to distraction, overwhelming learners' cognitive load (Meyer et al., 2019). Establishing guidelines and promoting student focus within the learning app can help mitigate these issues (Meyer et al., 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the ability to comprehend and produce written text holds immense

importance in the realm of education, particularly in tertiary institutions. Synthesis writing, a complex skill that necessitates the amalgamation of information from diverse sources, is crucial for university students. However, many students face challenges when attempting to master this skill. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on teaching and learning, it is crucial to explore alternative approaches to address these challenges. Mobile learning, characterized by its utilization of device applications, has emerged as a promising avenue for enhancing learning engagement, promoting collaborative learning, and providing convenient accessibility. Nonetheless, the implementation of mobile learning is not devoid of challenges. Through a comprehensive examination of the advantages and challenges associated with mobile learning in the context of improving synthesis writing skills, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge, shedding light on the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach.

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