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(Review paper)

SMARTPHONES AS ESSENTIAL EDUCATIONAL TOOLS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: The world around us has changed and smartphones are present in every aspect of our daily lives. This advanced technology can benefit both students and teachers. However, teachers in North Macedonia still resist the changes that are essential for achieving a 21st century classroom.

One simple and affordable way of improving the educational process is by using the smartphone as a teaching and a learning tool in the classroom. The successful implementation of smartphones in the regular curriculum will benefit both teachers and students.

In this paper I will discuss the most common obstacles that students and teachers face, the appropriate solutions for those obstacles and the general advantages of the smartphone as an educational tool in the classroom. I will also offer practical examples for using the smartphones in the EFL classroom.

Key words: smartphones, secondary schools, EFL.

Introduction

Nowadays, technology development has reached its peak. The newest and most advanced technological gadgets are present in our daily life, our professional environment, in our entertainment etc. The most used are probably the smartphones, which have been around for more than a decade. Although it seems that everyone is using them whether for fun, for work or for learning, the schools in Macedonia are at a standstill in relation to the smartphones. The only time when smartphones are mentioned by public schools or teachers, it is mostly in relation to a situation when a smartphone was misused by a student at class or at school, and the other popular topic is regulations or bans for using smartphones in schools proposed by individual schools.

However, the turmoil caused by the contemporary pandemic has made an abrupt change in the schools' opinion concerning smartphones. Suddenly there are discussions and regulations proposed by the Ministry of Education for an online teaching and online learning in both Elementary and Secondary schools. Consequently, this has caused some concerns and problems for both teachers and students, but it has also shown the advantages of using smartphones and the Internet.

In this paper I will talk about the advantages of using smartphones as educational tools in the teaching process and the ways in which we should incorporate them in regular curriculum.

Obstacles that teachers and students face

The first point I would like to address is why is apathy toward smartphones omnipresent among teachers in North Macedonia. Although there are exceptions, teachers often seem focused on how to exclude or ban the smartphones from the classroom instead of using them as an advantage. It is contradictory that while aiming toward a 21st century classroom and contemporary teaching, we refuse to change the classic teaching model that is basically a plan on the board, an oral explanation by the teacher and a strict environment that doesn't allow much space for the personal opinions or the needs of the students. Also a few documentaries, photos and other printable materials are not contemporary, but old-fashioned teaching tools.

I believe that there are a few causes for the status-quo for the technology usage in our schools. Probably the major cause for not using new technologies or smartphones as part of the lessons is the fear for their misuse by the students. There have been many incidents involving students filming the lesson, taking pictures etc. and at the same time there is the possibility of using the phones to chat, play games and any other activity that would be just a distraction for the student in the process of learning.

Another cause is the inability by some teachers to successfully and quickly prepare teaching materials that can be used through the smartphones. Some teachers are good at using online materials, online applications and other computer work, but this depends solely on the individual. This possibility of a teacher refusing to incorporate new technologies in the classroom due to the fear of failing, having technological problems and doubting their abilities should be avoided. Having the appropriate skills also entangles the point that sometimes preparing this type of activities can be time consuming and some teacher don't believe that is worth doing. However, it is evident that there is a lack of seminars organized by the Ministry of Education or the schools themselves to help all teachers of any subject to develop the necessary skills for this type of teaching.

The second point that needs to be discussed are a few probable obstacles for the students. Although it seems that everyone has a smartphone, it will be very naïve to state it as a fact. Naturally the people in our country, as well as in any other country, work in different fields and have different income. Herein some of them can afford to buy their children the newest smartphone, while others choose more modest and affordable models, and there are also those who can afford for themselves and their children a simple and ordinary mobile phone. This means that in a class there might be a student that doesn't have the suitable equipment for the activities that you as a teacher had planned.

Also, some students, especially students in elementary schools might have difficulty using the phone or an application due to weaker skills either in technology or in English. We mustn't forget that most applications, websites and other online activities can be found mostly in English and other foreign languages, while the Macedonian language is not very present. There are some models of smartphones, that don't even offer the ability to choose Macedonian as the language of the phone.

Possible solutions

All of the above-mentioned obstacles have a suitable solution. In order to prevent possible misuse by the students, there should be a policy concerning the usage of smartphones at the school. It should be clearly explained to them when and for what type of activities is allowed to use your smartphone. These rules should be established at the beginning of the school year as any other rule that applies at the school, and there should be punishments for not adhering to the rules as well. There isn't a reason why any student, especially a high-school student wouldn't be able to understand and respect this type of environment.

The problem concerning the level of the teachers' skill to work on this new technology can be overcome by personal effort. However, this depends on the individual and his/her desire for professional development. Herein the Ministry of Education must constantly provide the teachers with courses or seminars that will help improve their technological skills, and the professionals at the school that are on a higher position than the teacher should monitor if this contemporary teaching is successfully implemented. This will also help the teachers to be better at their work and this part of their job would not be considered time-consuming.

If the teachers are well equipped with the needed skills and they are aware that the change in the teaching process is eminent, this will automatically resolve all the obstacles for improving our educational process.

The problems that arise for the students can be resolved similarly as the teachers' problems. Firstly, the Ministry of Education has to detect the students that might have financial problems and give them phones and annual Internet access as it was done during the current pandemic. This should be a practice for every school year. I believe that it will also help the general learning of students and that it will open more possibilities that these group of students were deprived from due to external factors. Secondly, the teachers of Informatics in every school whether it is Elementary or Secondary school, should organise a few annual skills workshops for students in all levels. These should be non-obligatory workshops, with no assessment, but for the interested students who want to improve their skills in using the internet and the new technology.

Although there might be some other problems that I have overlooked, there are probably suitable solutions as well. We must change the current practice of teaching and make it complementary to the 21st century. Our students live in an advanced technological world and our classrooms should reflect this world.

Advantages and recommendations

Let's imagine that we have solved all the above-mentioned obstacles and we enter our new modern classroom. What are the opportunities that this offers us? What are the actual changes that we should make and how can we implement this new teaching in a successful way?

Teachers in Macedonia are required to use the information and communication technology throughout the year for all school subjects. As I have mentioned this is usually done by using a TV or the computer classroom in a school. However, I can confirm from first hand that not all classroom in a school have a TV and it is difficult to obtain access to a computer room when there are around 32 classes at the school. But if we analyse the access to a

smartphone, most students have it all the time and it doesn't depend on anything else but themselves. Consequently, the usage of the information and communication technology can be done more often and more successfully through the students' smartphones. Smartphone as learning aid is considered convenient and portable, gives comprehensive learning experience, offers multiple sources of leaning materials and is environmentally friendly (Anshari, Almunawar, Shahrill, Wicaksono & Huda5, 2017).

As I work in a secondary school, I will discuss the advantages and possibilities for secondary school students. Secondary school students are old enough and have learned enough so that they are able to use their smartphones independently and correctly. They are also able to understand the importance of following the rules that will clearly restrict the smartphone usage.

First of all, any teacher should explain to the students on the first day of school about how much and when they can be using the smartphones. For lessons in which they won't be used at all, they can be placed on a separate bench in front of the teacher as it is practice in the school where I work. Otherwise the teacher should inform the students that on the next lesson they will use the phones at the beginning or maybe at the end of the lessons for additional activities. Once the rules are set, they mustn't be changed throughout the year and appropriate punishment should be applied for any misconduct by the students. Consequently, the rules will be respected by all.

Then we should go through our yearly teaching plans and mark when and how can we implement a certain smartphone activity. It can be either for the actual lesson, or it can be for homework assignment.

I believe that many books that we use as coursebooks lack exercising activities regardless of the subject. Hence, the first way of using students' smartphones is to send them a premade link to additional exercises at the end of the lesson. In this way adapt smartphones as a tool for personalized learning which is a long process that requires teachers to engage in a great deal of structured planning, followed by the introduction of the use of smartphones to pupils along with continuous guidance (Sormunen, Kati. 2014). Teachers encourage the individual work of each student, and at the same time we see assess how much the material was understood and what areas should be worked on again or more thoroughly. The activities should be well planned beforehand, they should be short and with easy directions. It can be multiple choice activity, choosing the appropriate answer, connecting photos, doing crossword etc. The options are countless and they depend on the subject and the particular lesson. The key point is not to base all your lesson on phone activities, but to keep in mind that it is a support tool that should accompany and improve your lesson.

The other opportunity is to be able to give students a variety of activities as homework. I have realized during the pandemic that many of the students were eager to do their homework assignments. Surprisingly, even the ones that were rather passive during the school year, were now doing all of their assignments. I believe that the reason for this is because they have more time to do an activity, they can do it anywhere, it isn't much time-consuming, and it is easier and more entertaining for them because of the phones. Herein, we as teachers should prepare many short activities, with different ways of fulfilling the answers; in order to motivate all the students to do them and not to feel bored and exhausted after doing their homework. These premade materials can also serve us as an opportunity for student collaboration. Students can interact among each other, share opinions and try to overcome certain problems before they come to school and talk about it with the teacher.

The smartphone gives you the ability to send your students additional explanations, exercises, practical demonstrations of the topic, listening materials, speaking materials etc. If someone needs more time to do an activity, now there is that possibility. If someone needs to repeat what you have explained, or see an actual practical demonstration of the area that was taught, now you have that possibility. Also, there is a great number of ways to help talented students, so that they don't feel "stuck" by less challenging activities. You can send them more complex problems to solve, to watch and later discuss it. All this contributes to the creation of an equal learning opportunity for all students.

Finally, the question that remains is what is the best way of doing all this work. There are many sites that are easy to use and are designed for teachers. Google classrooms and google forms, Facebook page or a group, Microsoft teams etc. are some of the most used tools from teachers around the world.

I highly recommend google forms as both easy to use and divergent too. It offers you to make various activity formats, which you can send to your students through a link that guides them directly to the activity. Students are able to sign themselves, so you can easily follow their personal progress throughout the school year. Some schools, such as the Secondary School "Kole Nehtenin" in Shtip, chose to use Microsoft teams during the pandemic, but it proved to be difficult to navigate both for teachers and students due to the complex process of downloading it, making an account, signing in etc. Teachers at the "Sports Academy" also situated in Shtip were given more freedom in choosing how to interact with the students. Most of them chose the application Zoom for 40 minutes online lessons and Facebook for posting materials and receiving feedback. The advantage of using a group or a page on Facebook is the ability of posting for a closed circle of students and not going public, but the disadvantage is that you and all the students need to have a profile on the social network, which might be a problem for some of them.

Although variety of useful sites and applications is enormous, but the it is essential that the school as an institution offers one tool for all subjects. It will be easier and simpler for both students and teachers.

Implementing smartphones in the EFL curriculum

Usually language teachers, and especially English teachers are more open to using technological devices in the classroom. This may be due to the advantage of knowing a language that makes handling these devices easier and also the nature of the subject that seeks more than oral explanation and written exercises. As a teacher in a secondary school and a teacher of English as a foreign language, I would like to share my personal experience and advice on the implementation of smartphones in English lessons.

When I first started teaching, I was given by the school an enormous old and heavy radio that offered playing the listening tracks from the book, which were on a CD. It was an unnecessary hard work, which I immediately replaced by using a personal small mp3 player and speakers. Soon I replaced this again by an iPad and additional speakers. However new technology helped me to make changes again and this was only in a period of five years. Nowadays I am using my smartphone and a large Bluetooth speaker, which I need only in classes with larger number of students. I have all the tracks for all levels in different files on my

smartphone. It is easy to access, fast and reliable. There are listening tracks for texts before students read it, listening tracks for gapped exercises or questions etc. All these activities in relation to the listening part of learning English are already made and given to us as teachers. Herein, it would be very useful to share it with the students. They will be able to listen as many times as they need and improve their listening skills.

However, the smartphone is not just a replacement for the radio. It is a replacement for a computer that is much more affordable. The application that helps me organize and keep all my work in one place is “Dropbox”. It is free, you can store any type of document (word, photo, videos, books etc). and it is accessible from multiple devices. I have a folder for every class that I teach, where I keep the coursebook, the workbook, the listening tracks, the video materials, tests, tables for students’ progress, daily lesson plans, the curriculum for the school year etc. It is easy to prepare any material on your computer and home, and it automatically transfers to your phone. Herein, it is very useful for teachers and enables you to omit a ton of printable documents and books.

Since teachers have a great benefit from this technological device, we mustn’t deprive our students from the same opportunities. Hence, how can we help our students in learning English by using the phone?

Beside the listening, in our classroom students are able to sometimes use their smartphones as a dictionary during writing tasks. Although they ask me for help, they also have the need to check their spelling or the definition of a certain word just as they would do with a regular dictionary. Another opportunity is during team work and projects. In the “Sports Academy” our students learn vocabulary in relation to various sports and sport figures. Often, they make projects such as “The perfect football team”, “The rules of playing baseball”, “Best midfielders” etc. All these projects require fact checking and the teacher doesn’t always have the answers. Here one student from the group uses the phone to help with writing correct information and completing the project during school lessons.

Also, very often we need more grammar and vocabulary exercises during class. Since students don’t have workbooks, I use the workbook materials to prepare the exercises at home on an application. Usually, at the end of class (around 15 minutes before the end) I sent them the link, and they open the exercise. It can be a gapped exercise, multiple choice and sometimes it is just a photo from the workbook. Either everyone does it individually and automatically gets a mark on the phone, or we read it sentence by sentence while they click on the answers.

Although, it can be very useful during lessons, the smartphone is much more useful as a learning tool at home. During the pandemic, I used a Facebook group where I posted all the materials either through photos, documents or videos and we also used the Facebook room for actual forty-minute lessons. I intend to continue using it as a place where I will provide the students with additional materials and explanations according to their curriculum, and future homework assignments.

Conclusion

Teachers in North Macedonia have to embrace the fact that the change in the teaching process is eminent. Their lessons and their classrooms have to reflect the real world, which is full

of advanced technology. The most affordable teaching that can be used by any student is the smartphone. Having the smartphone as part of the regular curriculum will benefit the students, the teachers and the educational process in general.

The successful implementation of smartphones as educational and teaching tools can be achieved if teachers:

- Improve their computer skills,
- Plan most of the activities before the school year,
- Mark activities in the yearly plan,
- Set clear rules for students at the beginning of the school year,
- Have materials ready before the lessons,
- Offer short and divergent activities,
- Offer challenging and complex activities for talented students,
- Use the smartphone as a complementary tool
- Do not make the smartphone a focal point.

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