



Postgraduate students' use of smartphones for English language learning: Navigating the balance between autonomy and distraction

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Abstract

Smartphones have become visibly powerful, operationally convenient, and functionally accessible educational tools in English language learning. As mobile-assisted language learning encounters both opportunities and challenges, students' cognitive distractions and their misuse are common concerns that compromise learning outcomes. This study seeks to understand how postgraduate students in Nepal perceive smartphone use for English language learning, examining both its benefits and challenges. It also explores how the learners navigate between autonomous learning and learning distraction while using smartphones. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed to gather reflections from ten postgraduate English majors from two Nepali universities, aged 25 to 30, from varied socio-academic backgrounds, using semi-structured interviews. Ethical considerations were upheld through the use of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and participant validation. The findings showed that participants perceived smartphones as portable and adaptable tools for accessing multimodal learning resources for English language learning. Smartphones enhanced their autonomous learning and provided access to authentic exposure in English, despite their distracting roles. They also regulated their use to maintain academic focus. The use of smartphones boosts students' English language learning if it is used appropriately to enhance conventional pedagogy. It promotes their autonomy and provides authentic exposure. Digital awareness and self-regulation strategies for using smartphones within academic settings can lead to the goals of mobile-assisted language learning. This study contributes to the evolving field of mobile-assisted language learning and explores how the learners compromise the interplay between learning autonomy and digital distraction.

Keywords: Autonomous learning; Digital distraction; English language learning; Mobile-assisted language learning; Personalized learning

1. Introduction

The pervasive integration of smartphone technology into the educational ecosystem has substantially reshaped access to learning and learner engagement in English language education [ELE]. It has facilitated the advancement of knowledge across multiple dimensions by promoting personal, informal, and formal education in socially collaborative environments (Luo & Watts, 2022). It has also offered a practical solution to recover individual learning gaps by providing flexible, on-demand access to language learning resources. Consequently, students and educational institutions have benefited through enhanced communication, coordination, instant responses at need, parental involvement in students' learning, and educational data management (Durnali, 2025). In Nepal, a significant number of students independently use smartphones as educational tools, from personal initiatives for peer collaboration to engage with diverse learning resources. They use smartphones as an alternative solution to resolve the challenges, such as limited access to learning materials, minimal exposure to English outside of the classroom, and reliance on traditional teaching methods (Kandel, 2015) in the conventional university classrooms. Through mobile applications focusing on vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking, learners can independently and consistently practice English even when classroom resources are scarce. In the meantime, the overuse of smartphones may reduce students' attention and persistence in learning due to digital distraction (Durnali, 2025; Fute et al., 2025).

Nonetheless, the constructive role of smartphones in education is widely recognized, particularly for their capacity to enhance access to learning materials to promote self-directed and collaborative engagement for learning. Research at both global and regional levels supports these benefits. Shrestha (2012) highlighted the value of mobile technologies in English language learning [ELL] in Nepal, while systematic reviews across various contexts have shown improvements in

learners' listening, speaking, and vocabulary acquisition through smartphone-based learning—particularly when students work collaboratively rather than studying alone. Metruk (2021) studied Slovak EFL learners and found generally neutral to positive attitudes toward using smartphone apps, especially for vocabulary development. However, learners were less enthusiastic about their use for speaking practice. Interestingly, the study noted that female students tended to show more favorable views than their male counterparts, and emphasized the need for greater teacher involvement and further research to maximize the benefits of mobile-assisted language learning. More recently, Sitanggang et al. (2024) found that students view smartphones as highly effective tools for language learning, citing their ease of use, functionality, and accessibility. Their findings suggest that integrating smartphones into language instruction can enhance learning outcomes and should be incorporated when designing educational policies and teaching strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the vital role of smartphones in education. With the sudden shift to online learning, these devices became essential for attending virtual classes and accessing study materials. However, as noted by Kandel (2025), the users faced challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited technical support, and screen fatigue, which shaped their attitudes toward mobile learning. Despite the growing reliance on smartphones for ELL in Nepal, a notable paucity of empirical research exists on how postgraduate students perceive and experience mobile-assisted language learning [MALL], and how teachers help students learn the English language using smartphones. Understanding their use, the difficulties encountered, and the strategies employed provide teachers and learners with valuable insights for the preparation and practice of MALL. Such knowledge is crucial for students, educators, and concerned stakeholders to support advanced English education in Nepal through digital means.

2. Review of Literature

In Nepal, where English is taught as a foreign language, mobile technology, especially smartphones, has increasingly become a part of students' academic lives. The growing use of smartphones in the country coincides with a broader global trend where MALL is recognized as a flexible, accessible, and student-centred approach (Sanaullah et al., 2025). Although mobile learning is not yet formally embedded in Nepal's national curriculum, recent studies show that students are independently incorporating smartphones into their learning routines, especially in urban and semi-urban higher education institutions. Kandel (2024) found that preservice English teachers at the university's postgraduate programmes under the Faculty/School of Education used ICT tools, including smartphones, for obtaining content knowledge, pedagogic knowledge, and technological skills. Joshi and Ayer (2024) found that Nepali school teachers in rural areas of Nepal used diverse ICT tools, including smartphones in ELT, to support their pedagogical practices. They further identified that the teachers underwent excessive workload, limited time to use ICT in teaching and learning, and maintenance difficulties in using the tools.

Studies have explored that the use of mobile technologies in educational contexts fosters students' propensity for collaboration and knowledge sharing, thereby enhancing their intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in the learning process (Crompton & Burke, 2018; Hidayat, 2024; Hu et al., 2023). Mobile learning has become a practical and effective alternative in educational contexts where access to computer technology is limited or unavailable (Parajuli et al., 2024). The portability and convenience of mobile devices motivate learners to engage with educational content across spatial and temporal contexts, thereby promoting sustained and self-directed learning. This flexibility supports autonomous learning and encourages students to take an active and self-initiated role in their learning (Kandel, 2025). Tembe (2021) conducted a study among bachelor-level students in eastern Nepal and found that learners held largely positive perceptions of using smartphones for ELL. Participants reported using mobile applications such as dictionaries, grammar apps, YouTube, and audio platforms to practice listening and speaking skills. The research also found that smartphones enabled learners to access English content outside the classroom and made learning autonomous. However, challenges such as inconsistent internet access, financial constraints in maintaining data packages, and the lack of structured guidance

were noted as persistent barriers. These concerns are echoed in broader discussions about digital equity in Nepal, where rural students often face greater difficulty in accessing technology for educational purposes.

Similarly, Thapa et al. (2020) identified a prevalent pattern of mobile phone dependence among undergraduate medical learners in the Eastern part of Nepal, which was significantly associated with variables such as daily duration of mobile usage, frequency of calls, monthly expenditure on mobile credit, and time of device ownership. It was similar between male and female students. The findings implied to design and implementation of targeted educational interventions aimed at promoting responsible and purposeful mobile phone usage among university learners. Guo et al. (2022) found that students held positive attitudes towards mobile assisted English learning, and they most tended to use smartphones in informal English learning. Similarly, Parajuli (2024) found that teachers leveraged smartphones to enhance professional knowledge, monitor performance, and engage in peer collaboration. He identified that teachers used smartphones to learn content knowledge, acquire pedagogical skills and for professional development. While students used smartphones to access online classes, digital learning materials, and practice English language skills, they struggled with device fatigue, limited storage, and frequent distractions from non-academic apps (Kandel, 2024). The study highlighted that although smartphones played a crucial role during lockdowns, their effectiveness as educational tools depended heavily on learners' digital literacy and the availability of supportive learning environments.

A review of scholarly journal articles published between 2018 and 2023 regarding mobile device usage among tertiary-level learners (Hui et al., 2023) reveals that mobile applications, including educational and social media applications, have positively contributed to learner autonomy and provided pedagogical benefits, particularly within the context of EFL education. Similarly, Samala et al. (2025) explored that mobile learning has embraced a range of innovative pedagogical strategies, such as augmented reality, social media integration, gamification, and the utilization of learning management systems. It has significantly promoted student engagement, interactivity, and motivation for lifelong learning. Nonetheless, the review identified that implementation of these advanced digital learning environments has been hindered by inadequate digital literacy, unreliable internet connectivity, and persistent infrastructural limitations across many educational settings. Novarita (2021) found mobile technology useful for learning English, as it helped students access learning materials more easily. The study concluded that students had a strong positive perception of mobile technology, especially in terms of its usefulness and ease of use.

Despite the promising findings at secondary and undergraduate levels, a noticeable gap persists in the literature focusing on master's level students in Nepal. Master's students need to acquire mastery in discipline-specific vocabulary, syntactic complexities, rhetorical skills, and strategic use of language rather than merely acquiring the English language for general communication. Additionally, they are expected to engage in complex academic and cognitively demanding tasks such as research writing, critical reading, and scholarly communication, all of which require a higher level of English language proficiency and scholarly communication skills in professional settings. It remains unclear how smartphones support these advanced English learning tasks, or whether students at the postgraduate level perceive mobile devices as effective tools for their academic development. In this regard, this study aims to explore how postgraduate university students use smartphones to learn English language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, and vocabulary through their narrated experiences. Specifically, the study was carried out to uncover the following research questions:

RQ 1) How do postgraduate university students perceive smartphones for ELL?

RQ 2) In what ways do the postgraduate students use smartphones and varied applications for ELL?

RQ 3) How do smartphones help students access authentic English input and promote autonomous learning? And

RQ 4) What experiences do students possess regarding learning distractions of smartphones, and how do they manage these challenges?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Narrative inquiry design within the interpretivist research paradigm was employed in this study to explore how postgraduate M.Ed. fourth-semester students perceived and used smartphones for ELL. This design helped understand their narrated experiences of using smartphones for learning the English language (Barkhuizen, 2014; Lewis, 2011) through “story in the context of time, place, and sociality” (Finlay & Dela Cruz, 2023, p. 2). It led to an in-depth understanding of how personal, social, and cultural networks shaped participants’ experiences. This method allowed the researcher to engage directly with participants’ experiences as “lived and told” (Caine et al., 2016, p. 215) and uncover how they experienced mobile-based learning in their everyday lives. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it aligns with understanding learners as whole individuals, not just as data collection points. It studies how humans experience the world, and “education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Moreover, it helped to understand the inherent complexities behind the postgraduate scholars’ use of smartphones for learning English more explicitly (Hardin et al., 2025). Additionally, it uncovered how smartphones supported autonomy or created distractions, based on real-life educational journeys in and out of their academic institutions and homes.

3.2. Participants

Purposefully selected ten postgraduate students enrolled in the fourth semester of the Master of Education programs in two universities in Nepal who could share their experiences of the study phenomenon [smartphones for learning English] were invited to participate in this study (Finlay & Dela Cruz, 2023). They represented an equal number of males and females between 25 and 30 years of age, and came from diverse academic and socio-cultural backgrounds within shared educational and regional contexts in Karnali Surkhet. Each participant had regular access to a smartphone and actively used it for ELL. Ten participants from two higher education institutions were selected because the study is a thematically focused collective inquiry that aims to explore thematic understandings of shared experiences across multiple life stories on smartphone use for ELL. Of them, two of the participants were included later, who met the inclusion criteria. However, the slightly larger sample helped capture participants’ personal, sociocultural, linguistic, and institutional variations following narrative inquiry principles to elicit locally resonant and methodologically robust stories (Clandinin et al., 2007). This diversity allowed me to trace how they experienced using smartphones differently based on their language skills and individual contexts.

3.3. Data Collection

An unstructured interview is a common tool for gathering data in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this research, complete data generation took over five months through unstructured interviews with each participant, strategically supplemented by informal conversations conducted before and after each interview session. This sustained dialogic engagement fostered rapport with the participants and enriched the depth, continuity, and contextual resonance of their stories and experiences. They reflected and elaborated on their insights during the interviews (Block, 2023; Holton, 2024) that lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, depending on the depth of the narratives shared. Face-to-face interview sessions were conducted at the participants’ convenience, though informal conversation occurred both online and on sight. To maintain accuracy, interviews were audio-recorded with permission and then transcribed verbatim. The interviews and reflective journals elicited the participants’ motivations for using smartphones for learning English at the initial stages, the applications they mostly relied on, the benefits they perceived, the frequency and the quality of their use, the challenges and distractions they encountered, and the strategies they managed to resolve them through their stories and experiences, organized chronologically. They began their stories from the first time they obtained smartphones, started using them for learning English, and up to the date of the interviews.

3.4. Data Analysis

For data analysis, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023) of their narrative stories was employed, which retained each participant's full story while identifying recurring patterns. First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to grasp the narrative stories. Following early familiarization with the data, the transcripts were coded inductively to generate initial codes. The codes revealed meaningful behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of the participants related to smartphone use for ELL. Third, the codes were collated, refined, and assigned into larger categories and themes through iterative comparison to ensure internal coherence and conceptual clarity. Themes that emerged through this process were checked against the entire dataset, focusing on how students used smartphones as anytime learning companions, how they personalized their learning through mobile applications, how they accessed authentic English exposure as learning input, and how they addressed the challenges. In the fifth stage, themes were defined and named to capture the essence and scope of the study based on the research questions. It subsequently produced four consecutive themes that reflected the crux of the study. Finally, in the sixth stage, the findings of the study were produced by weaving the thematic insights and data extracts for illustration. Meaning was constructed based on the thematic analysis of the data that visualized participants' stories.

3.5. Ethical Procedure and Research Credibility

For maintaining ethical standards throughout the study, the purpose of the research was clearly explained to the participants, and their voluntary participation was gained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before audio-recording the interviews began. Likewise, to safeguard participants' identities, pseudonyms were used, and the research sites (colleges of the participants) were blurred. Moreover, the stories were fictionalized as if they were told by others, and the participants were encouraged to fictionalize their experiences (of using smartphones for learning English) based on their lives and livings (Caine et al., 2016). Similarly, to improve trustworthiness, follow-up communication occurred before member checking was done through participant validation (Nassaji, 2020) by sharing transcripts and a preliminary draft of the report with the participants. It helped verify the accuracy of their stories. Additionally, feedback and guidance were obtained from fellow narrative inquirers, called the response community in narrative research (Finlay & Dela Cruz, 2023, p. 3). Researcher maintained reflexive journals during the study to reflect on their positions, thoughts, and potential biases while conducting interviews and analyzing data. Furthermore, research rigor and validity were ensured through depth, transparency, and contextual sensitivity (Barkhuizen et al., 2024).

4. Results

The findings illustrate a complex and nuanced understanding of how mobile technology shapes postgraduate students' ELL stories under the education stream in Nepal. The following four themes emerged from the analysis: A pocket-sized anytime learning companion, a personalised learning tool with varied applications for ELL, tools to access authentic English exposure and elicit autonomous learning, and a pocket library or distraction hub: smart habits make the difference.

4.1. A Pocket-sized Anytime Learning Companion

The data revealed that postgraduate students perceived smartphones as accessible, flexible, and portable tools that supported their ELL beyond the confines of formal instruction. Participants described smartphones as pocket-transferable learning tools that allowed them to engage with ELL content regardless of time and space. This sharing justified the convenience and immediacy of mobile access, which allowed them to integrate English practice into their daily routines with minimal disruption. They reported that the flexibility afforded by smartphones enabled them to transform otherwise unproductive periods, such as commuting, waiting between classes, or during meals, into valuable learning opportunities. One participant, Abhishek, articulated this clearly: "Smartphones are very helpful for learning English because they let me study anytime and

anywhere". His account reflects a broader pattern in the data, where they described how mobile devices helped them maintain consistent exposure to English throughout the day. Similarly, Arpan noted:

I don't carry the course books all the time. When I get free time, even between classes or mealtime, I open my mobile and review vocabulary. It's so easy and fast. Earlier, I wasted those minutes, but now they are part of my study routine. Mobile helps me use my time properly. It's a good friend of mine in learning. Yet, I cannot use it perfectly.

These reflections suggest that smartphones not only facilitated access to learning materials but also encouraged time management and the development of self-directed study habits. In this sense, it has been a good learning tool for students that enhances learner autonomy in ELL in Nepal. It also shows that they await learning to use it better and purposefully.

Participants also reported that they used offline resources stored on their smartphones, including saved documents, videos, and resources in mobile applications. This allowed them to engage with English content without relying on continuous internet connectivity. Similarly, the possibility to retrieve learning materials on demand contributed to a sense of control and independence in their learning process. In addition to offline access, students described using interactive features of smartphones such as audio recordings, vocabulary apps, and digital exercises to acquire specific ELL skills, including vocabulary, listening comprehension, and pronunciation practices. The social dimension of smartphone use also emerged strongly in the data. Participants shared that they used messaging platforms, particularly Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, to collaborate with peers and get assistance from teachers and mentors. These interactions included learning vocabulary, correcting each other's mistakes, asking questions, and discussing language-related topics. Anamika shared that chatting in English helped her overcome shyness and practice speaking. Additionally, Mohan noted that teachers also contributed to these digital spaces by sharing resources and encouraging participation. These peer-supported platforms were informally used, yet they were effective extensions of classroom learning.

Additionally, the participants highlighted the role of AI-powered tools and offline dictionaries in facilitating quick reference and autonomous learning. Srutee remarked that these features allowed her to "find answers fast without the need for a continuous internet connection". Kritika shared that she frequently watched educational videos and engaged in voice chats to improve her spoken English. It showed how learners actively sought out multimedia content to support their learning. Overall, the data indicate that smartphones have become a versatile, empowering tool for ELL. The portability, ease of access, and capacity to support both individual and collaborative learning made smartphones integral to learning English. It enhanced the learners' ability to learn 'anytime and anywhere' through sustained engagement, increased autonomy, and meaningful integration despite occasional distractions caused by multitasking, social media notifications, media temptation, and digital interruptions while dealing with complex and lengthy learning materials.

4.2. Personalized Learning Tool with Varied Applications for Learning English

A major finding of this study is the extent to which smartphones facilitated a personalized and learner-centered approach to ELL. Participants emphasized the flexibility and adaptability of smartphones in meeting their individual learning needs, preferences, and pace. Unlike their usual classrooms, learning environments adhered to standardized curricula and rigid schedules, smartphones afforded learners the autonomy to adapt their own learning needs. This personalization was evident in various forms, such as the selection of preferred content types, the use of specific language learning applications, and the development of individualized study routines. Learners were able to engage with learning English in ways that aligned with their cognitive styles, linguistic goals, and daily schedules, thereby enhancing both the relevance and effectiveness of their learning.

For instance, one participant, Atul, described how he utilized smartphone features to tailor his learning process: "Smartphones help me learn English in a way that fits my own style. I often

record myself speaking and listen back to improve, comparing my speech with a native speaker's". This practice exemplifies reflective learning, wherein the learner actively monitors and evaluates their performance, identifies areas for improvement, and adjusts strategies accordingly. Such self-regulated learning behaviors are important for language development. They promote metacognitive awareness and foster a sense of ownership over the learning process. The ability to personalize learning through mobile technology thus empowered students to become more autonomous, self-motivated, and resilient. Atul also reported that he shared the recording with his friends and teachers and received feedback for improving his speech. Such practices of the participants ultimately helped them enhance the overall ELL. In addition, smartphones served as valuable tools for overcoming immediate linguistic barriers. The participants reported frequent use of applications such as Google Translate and digital dictionaries to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases. For example, Bibek noted, "I use Google Translate or dictionaries if I don't understand a word or phrase. It helps me learn English better". The participants found that the tools provided instant feedback and support, enabling them to engage with authentic English content without many comprehension difficulties. The immediacy and accessibility of such resources contributed to a morph and uninterrupted learning experience. It allowed them to maintain momentum in learning and deepen their understanding at the time of their choice.

Furthermore, smartphones facilitated social and collaborative learning through digital and interactive platforms. The use of messenger groups and WhatsApp groups, in particular, emerged significant medium for peer interaction and informal language practice platforms. Students reported that these groups functioned as dynamic learning communities where they shared vocabulary, corrected each other's mistakes, asked questions, and exchanged ideas. Lalita, a female participant, remarked, "Sometimes I learn more from friends than from class. Also, when I'm shy to speak English, chatting helps me practice without pressure. I use English without conscious efforts". This insight implies the importance of collaboration and sharing in language learning. It helped them reduce their anxiety and provided them with a facilitative environment for learning English. However, occasional distractions emerged in the collaboration due to technical reasons and group-member-induced extraneous talks.

Smartphones, in this way, helped reduce students' psychological barriers to second language acquisition. Additionally, the integration of teacher-shared resources, instructions to use smartphones for learning and research ideas, and educational applications in the groups further enriched students' learning experiences. The participants shared that they appreciated the ability to access instructional materials at their convenience, revisit content as needed, and progress at their own pace. This asynchronous mode of learning not only accommodates diverse learning styles but also supports the development of lifelong learning habits. The versatility of smartphones that combine personalized, autonomous, and socially enriched learning has become a powerful tool in ELL. Also, it helped them bridge formal and informal learning contexts, facilitate real-time support, and promote learner agency in English language pedagogy.

4.3. Tools to Access Authentic English Exposure and Elicit Autonomous Learning

The data revealed that while participants embraced the advantages of mobile learning, they recognized the enduring value of traditional classroom instruction. They found smartphones to be powerful tools for practice, exploration, and independent study. However, they did not perceive smartphones as comprehensive replacements for teacher-led face-to-face on-site learning. Participants emphasized that certain aspects of language acquisition, such as complex grammatical structures, nuanced explanations, and corrective feedback, required instructor guidance. This dual perspective of the participants reflects a nuanced understanding towards smartphones as a complementary resource that extends formal learning. Anamika's reflection encapsulates this sentiment: "Smartphones are useful, but sometimes I need teachers to explain difficult grammar and correct my mistakes. I also need proper guidelines for smartphones' academic use". Her statement highlights the limitations of mobile learning in addressing deeper linguistic challenges and underscores the importance of integrating digital tools with structured pedagogical support.

For Anamika, smartphones served as supplementary aids that enriched her learning experience, but they could not fully replicate the depth and responsiveness of classroom instruction. Moreover, she aspired for better digital skills and the appropriate use of smartphones for academic purposes. This view was echoed by other participants, who expressed appreciation for the flexible autonomy afforded by smartphones and the role of educators in facilitating comprehensive ELL.

In the meantime, the data strongly indicated that smartphones played a pivotal role in providing access to authentic English exposure and fostering autonomous learning. Participants frequently described how mobile devices enabled them to engage with real-world English content that extended beyond textbook materials. Bibek shared,

I learn English by watching YouTube videos every night. I can find useful and easily understandable English videos[...] with captions[...] it's not in our textbooks. It feels natural, and I can listen again and again. Mobile makes it very easy. I study when I want, without waiting for class or someone to tell me. I decide when [...], how [...], and from where to learn.

His account illustrates how learners used smartphones to access diverse and authentic language inputs, including conversational speech, idiomatic expressions, and culturally embedded usage that are often absent in formal curricula. Bibek's experience also reflects a broader trend among participants toward self-directed learning. The ability to choose when, how, and what to study was repeatedly mentioned as a key benefit of mobile learning.

Participants described how smartphones empowered them to take initiative, set personal goals, and engage with English content. This autonomy was not limited to passive consumption of knowledge; rather, participants actively sought out materials, revisited content for reinforcement, and experimented with different platforms of learning, such as videos, podcasts, and interactive apps, to enhance their understanding. The remarks of participants collectively suggest that smartphones serve as gateways to authentic language learning environments and as catalysts for independent learning. Although smartphones cannot replace the structured guidance of formal instruction, they significantly expand the scope of language exposure and learning autonomy. The findings implied a hybrid model of language learning, where mobile technology complements usual pedagogical practices. Consequently, it helps learners benefit from both structured teaching and personalized engagement with their smartphones in ELL.

4.4. Pocket Library or Distraction Hub: Smart Habits Make the Difference

The data revealed that the participants understood the dual nature of smartphones in the context of ELL. On the one hand, they widely acknowledged the educational potential of mobile devices; on the other hand, they also recognized the inherent risk of distraction induced by the use. In this way, they found smartphones both empowering tools and tempting distractions, with their effectiveness largely dependent on the user's discipline. This tension between usefulness and distraction emerged as a recurring theme, highlighting the importance of self-regulation in maximizing the benefits of smartphones in learning English. In this regard, Atul remarked, "Mobile is my study tool, but only when I stay disciplined". It implied that smartphones' value is contingent upon the learner's ability to maintain focus and resist non-academic temptations. Lalit echoed this sentiment with a candid observation: "One minute vocabulary, next minute Facebook. I make this balance". His comment reflects the ease with which learners can shift from productive engagement to scrolling aimlessly for entertainment. However, it also implies the potential attention deficit caused by the use of smartphones among students. Appropriate use of smartphones demands the conscious effort of the users to maintain academic and smart habits of use. Mohan similarly noted, "A smartphone can teach or distract, my habits decide. I'm trying to manage". It indicated an ongoing struggle of the users to navigate the competing demands of educational use of smartphones and endless scrolling for the sake of entertainment.

Similarly, Radha offered a more detailed reflection on the paradoxical nature of smartphone use:

Sometimes I feel my phone is like a mini library in my pocket. I have English dictionaries, grammar apps, PDF files, and even audiobooks. It's helpful, anytime, [...] outside or waiting for something.

But [...] one swipe can take me from study app to social media, [...] forget my plan. I may lose the whole hour or sometimes the whole night scrolling through Facebook posts or short videos.

Her account illustrates how smartphones can serve as rich repositories of learning resources while simultaneously posing a threat to time management and concentration. The immediacy and accessibility of both educational and non-educational content create a dynamic environment where intentional use becomes critical. Kritika's experience further emphasized the role of habit formation in mitigating distraction. She stated,

My phone is both a tool and a trap.[...] I follow my study routine, it helps me; [...] If I open it without a purpose, the distractions win.[...] it's not the phone; it's how we use it.[...] I [...] start with learning tasks before touching any entertainment apps. It helps me stay focused.[...] study apps on the first screen and social media apps on the next screens. I often hide them.

Her strategy of reorganizing app placement and prioritizing academic tasks reflects a proactive approach to digital self-discipline. It also demonstrates an awareness of cognitive triggers, teachers' support for the appropriate use of smartphones, and the importance of developing smart habits of using smartphones for enhancing learning.

Overall, the findings suggest that smartphones play a supportive and enriching role in ELL among university students. However, the effectiveness of use is dependent on user behavior. If the students use smartphones effectively, they offer flexible access to diverse tools and personalized learning experiences. Consequently, it enhances self-directed learning and learner autonomy in ELL. Nevertheless, they also present challenges related to distraction and overtime misuse. Participants emphasized that the value of smartphones in education is not only inherent to the technology itself, but also shaped by the habits, intentions, and self-discipline of the users. As students increasingly blend formal and informal learning strategies, the integration of smartphone technology into language education presents a promising avenue for enhancing learner autonomy and engagement in ELL.

5. Discussion

The study explored postgraduate students' stories and experiences of using smartphones and their strategies of using mobile resources and applications in ELL. It also revealed how they attained learning autonomy by using smartphones. Additionally, it identified the challenges and distractions associated with smartphone use in ELL and strategies they adopted to resolve them. The findings of this study highlight a paradigm shift in ELE in Nepal, where smartphones emerged as mediators of learner autonomy, engagement, and linguistic development, not only as auxiliary educational tools. Postgraduate students utilized smartphones as versatile and portable learning tools that facilitated continuous access to English language resources, enabled personalized learning trajectories, and fostered authentic exposure. Moreover, the findings reveal that the educational value of smartphones is contingent upon learners' capacity and decision to self-regulate, use them strategically, and maintain smart habits. The use of smartphones empowered students to repurpose idle time, customize learning experiences, and engage in collaborative digital communities. However, it also posed distractions in learning and cognitive overload for learners. The learners in this study also encountered learning interferences, including distraction, dependency, a lack of hands-on skills, and a reduction in the quality of face-to-face interaction. Accordingly, the study suggests that the pedagogical value of smartphones lies not in the technology itself, but in the learner's discipline and intentional use directed by carefully monitored smart habits. Otherwise, learners may fall into the vicious cycle of procrastination in learning and the temptation of social media (Anshari et al., 2017). The use of smartphones in learning erases spatial and temporal boundaries of knowledge acquisition. It allows widespread presence, personalization, private and collaborative engagement, and instant retrieval and sharing of information (Ozdamli & Cavus, 2011) in learning.

Smartphones are ubiquitous and ergonomically designed digital tools that facilitate learning and allow on-demand access to learning resources at our fingertips with a single touch. They possess different interface constructs such as navigation design, ergonomic design, content

supporting mechanism, and capacity, particularly communicated in users' interactions as portability, multiple windows, adjusting font size, touch screen, connectivity technology (4G, 5G, Wi-Fi), software features, screen resolution for clarity, battery life, storage capacity, camera, Ram and processing power, accessories (earbuds, chargers, memory cards, loudspeakers), applications, graphical design, ability to adapt horizontal and vertical positions, light-weight, ability to adjust lighting (Vongjaturapat et al., 2021). These features make smartphones ideal tools for learners to access learning materials outside the classroom, aligning with existing research on MALL, which highlights the potential of mobile technologies to extend learning opportunities beyond traditional educational boundaries (Crompton & Burke, 2018; Morchid, 2020). Additionally, participants of this study engaged with a wide array of digital properties of smartphones, including language learning applications, online videos, dictionaries, and AI-powered resources. Moreover, smartphones provided an interactive learning environment with recording, capturing photos and videos, instant messaging, and group chatting features that offered opportunities for seeking and giving feedback and resource sharing. It facilitated multimodal and collaborative learning involvement to improve listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar learning, and pronunciation skills in ELL. It reflects a shift toward learner-centred approaches that prioritise autonomy and responsiveness in language learning.

The use of smartphones, in this study, provided personalized learning experiences through mobile learning applications and resources for ELL. It enhanced independent and outside-of-classroom learning as well as participation in engaged and interactive learning (Vongjaturapat et al., 2021) and off-campus communication, sharing materials with students, and organizing discussions in the context of developing countries (Iqbal & Bhatti, 2020). Participants narrated that smartphones enabled them to tailor their study habits according to individual preferences, needs, and schedules. They used smartphones for recording their speech and listening back for self-reflection with reference to the native speakers or expert mentors. It helped them notice their fluency, pacing, pronunciation, intonation, and accuracy of use. The comparison with the native speakers and experts allowed them to identify their learning gap, especially in speech. It encouraged self-evaluation and self-correction, reduction in learning anxiety, and initiation of confidence-building. Additionally, they also shared the recordings with their peers and teachers to obtain corrective feedback. It exemplifies how learners used mobile tools to monitor progress, build confidence, and engage in self-regulated reflective learning, often accompanied by peer and expert feedback. Aligned with Deng et al. (2025), this study found that the use of smartphones in ELL helped minimize gender-based and performance-based differences among the students. These personalized strategies support the pedagogical shift toward blended learning models, where mobile technology supplements conventional instruction to create a more holistic educational experience (Vega et al., 2023). The emphasis on learner autonomy also resonates with contemporary second language acquisition theories that advocate for self-directed learning and individualized engagement in learning (Benson, 2011), supported by the informal learning platforms created online, consisting of their peers (and/or teachers). The collaboration helps reduce learning anxiety, cognitive load, and psychological barriers to foreign language learning. Furthermore, the positive attitudes expressed by students toward MALL reflect broader trends in global research, which underscore its flexibility and capacity to foster autonomous learning (Luo & Watts, 2022; Sanaullah et al., 2025).

Despite the clear benefits, participants also acknowledged the limitations of smartphone-based learning. Many participants emphasized that smartphones cannot fully replace the role of teachers, particularly in explaining complex grammatical structures and providing nuanced feedback. Participants also stressed the importance of integrating teacher instruction with MALL, as smartphones provided authentic resources that learners can use selectively based on their learning level, pace, and mood. This supports the view that blended learning approaches, combining mobile technologies with classroom-based teaching, are essential for optimizing learning outcomes (Vega et al., 2023). The study also revealed the dual function of smartphones: educational aids or mini-libraries and potential sources of distraction. They recognised the ease with which one could

shift from academic tasks to social media or entertainment. It suggested that concerns such as distraction from learning, time wastage, watching and listening to movies and songs, technostress, and social exclusion (Iqbal & Bhatti, 2020) have to be considered well while using smartphones. In this regard, the participants highlighted the importance of digital discipline and smart habits to avoid distractions. Their strategies, such as app organization, purposeful engagement, and prioritizing study tasks, demonstrate a growing awareness of the need for self-regulation in digital learning environments, resemble the concerns raised by Pimmer et al. (2016), who emphasized the importance of pedagogical structure and guidance in ensuring effective use of smartphones for educational purposes.

Moreover, the study's results underscore the broader challenges and opportunities of integrating smartphones into ELL within Nepal's higher education context. The findings of this study reveal that although mobile learning supports learners' autonomy, flexibility, and access to diverse resources, its use also demands advanced digital, creative, and judgmental skills to enhance students' ELL and academic ideas. As noted by Iqbal and Bhatti (2020), this study also identified a lack of training and knowledge, insufficient incentives for technology use, and technological constraints of smartphones as the major barriers. Without proper guidance, students risk superficial engagement or cognitive overload, which can impede learning outcomes (Attah et al., 2025; Fute et al., 2025). Teacher guidance on how to use smartphones properly in the classroom and for learning can compensate for the distraction effect of smartphones (Deng et al., 2025), along with self-directed disciplined habits. Only if smartphones are used appropriately, they become transformative tools to foster learner autonomy, engagement, and sustained language development. These concerns are particularly relevant in multilingual and socio-economically diverse settings, where equitable access to technology remains a pressing issue. As Attah et al. (2025), Devkota (2021), and Fute et al. (2025) note, mobile learning initiatives must be designed with inclusivity in mind, ensuring that learners from varied backgrounds are supported through appropriate training, infrastructure, and pedagogical assistance.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that smartphones are vital learning aids for ELL, particularly in resource-constrained environments. They facilitate accessibility, personalized learning, and engagement through diverse built-in tools and resources. These insights reinforce the argument that mobile applications have helped tertiary-level EFL learners develop autonomous learning habits (Hui et al., 2023) and that the successful use of smartphones in language education entails effective design, learner training, and pedagogical alignment. The findings of this study implied that to navigate the balance between students' autonomy and distraction while using smartphones in ELL, teachers can manage seminars to guide students, share experiences of self-regulation skills to use smartphones, raise awareness against unproductive and problematic smartphone use (e.g., excessive use, cyberloafing) or smartphone addiction (Gökçearsan et al., 2016). These metacognitive reminders make students actively engage in context-sensitive practices for intentional ELL. Additionally, teachers can send push notifications or messages that immediately appear on students' smartphone screens to remind them of their learning (Mumcu & Çebi, 2025), evaluate the quality, reliability, and validity of the learning materials, communicate the standard to students, and encourage them to participate in discussion both synchronously and asynchronously on shared learning materials and concerns (Anshari et al., 2017). Subsequently, it makes learners responsible for the appropriate use of smartphones in learning. Otherwise, they may overuse smartphones due to social media temptation for non-educational purposes. Transition to the students' self-regulation in learning using smartphones better follows teacher-regulation. It helps students build learning rigor, resilience, punctuality, and disciplined habits to reduce procrastination in learning (Sasaki & Kansai, 2025). Consequently, the students grow habitual in accessing information using smartphones when needed. They become responsible for their own learning, learn at their own pace, discover better learning styles, create and share knowledge, collaborate with their peers, and evaluate themselves (Ozdamli & Cavus, 2011). As mobile-assisted learning continues to evolve, its potential will be best realized through hybrid models that balance technological innovation with structured educational support.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the stories and perceptions of postgraduate students pursuing M.Ed. in English education from two universities in Nepal, regarding the use of smartphones to support ELL. The findings reveal that smartphones are widely accepted as versatile and empowering tools that enhance language acquisition through increased accessibility, autonomy, and multimodal engagement. The adaptable nature of mobile learning helped learners to incorporate ELL in everyday practices, transforming idle moments of commutes, breaks, or leisure time into productive learning opportunities. The temporal and spatial flexibility afforded by smartphone use is particularly consequential in educational contexts where formal instruction is often hindered by infrastructural inadequacies and logistical challenges faced by teachers and students. The study further demonstrated that smartphones facilitate personalized and self-directed learning experiences. The use of smartphones allows participants to actively customise their study habits using a range of digital tools, including language learning apps, online videos, dictionaries, and AI-powered assistants. These resources support skill development across all language domains, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Moreover, it also provides immediate feedback that reinforces learner engagement and responsiveness. Practices such as speech recording and self-review encouraged metacognitive awareness and fostered learners' agency in learning.

However, second language learners expect teacher-led or expert-guided instruction, especially in domains that demand specialized guidance, nuanced explanation, and corrective feedback. Teachers can help students learn technological, creative, and judgmental skills of using smartphones to the students synchronously, asynchronously, or in physical classrooms. It helps them to acquire expertise in using it for their academic purposes and overcome issues, such as social media temptation, smartphone addiction, and cyberloafing. Moreover, learners' clear preference for teacher-led support in mastering complex grammatical structures and pronunciation is visible among the students nurtured through teacher-dominated pedagogy. Nonetheless, the use of smartphones in learning is most effective when it is integrated with structured pedagogical scaffolding from more knowledgeable mentors. This reinforces the argument for integrated pedagogical approaches, merging the strengths of mobile technology with the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction and guided instruction. Importantly, the inherent risk of distraction and addictive habits of excessive smartphone use, especially through endless scrolling for gratification and entertainment, should be monitored through structured interventions that promote digital literacy, self-discipline, encourage mindful usage, and smart habits. It is imperative because the same device serves as a powerful tool for accessing educational resources, as well as a stimulant for accessing social media and entertainment platforms. The stakeholders can stay aware of the significant threat to learners' ability to maintain cognitive focus and academic discipline. The effectiveness of mobile learning depends on students' digital habits, self-regulation, and intentional use. Additionally, students may engage superficially with content or struggle to distinguish between educational and non-educational use without adequate training and teacher support.

These findings imply the need for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to strategically integrate mobile technologies into instructional practices and teacher professional development. The integration requires reexamination of pedagogical approaches wherein teachers are not only supported to use smartphones in lesson design but also in using digital tools for helping students learn, and the cultivation of responsible habits of smart usage. At the curricular level, there is a pressing need to address the heterogeneous nature of learners' technological competencies. It can be enhanced by fostering adaptable learning ecosystems that justifiably accommodate both face-to-face and mobile-mediated instruction. On top of that, stakeholders at the policy level need to recover the persistent challenges of digital divides and prioritize infrastructural investments for smartphone accessibility, internet connectivity, and digital literacy to address rural isolation and socio-economic marginalisation. Mobile learning policies must be sensitive to regional disparities, linguistic diversity, and the socio-economic realities of learners. In a multilingual and resource-constrained country like Nepal, smartphones hold the potential to

democratize access to English education if it is integrated with contextual awareness and inclusive support mechanisms.

Overall, smartphone-assisted learning is fast, reliable, and environmentally friendly. Students can search for learning resources, use learning applications, record or take videos of lectures, capture photos of learning materials, download materials for later use, and collaborate with others using their smartphones. In the meantime, this study demonstrates that mobile learning is not simply easier and suitable but a pedagogically significant practice that fosters personalised, accessible, and engaging educational experiences. Although the study is insightful, it possesses some methodological and contextual limitations. The research was confined to specific groups of postgraduate students within a single municipality. It depended on participants' self-reported data that may have been influenced by their subjective perceptions and social bias. Future research might employ research strategies that span a longer timeframe and demographically varied samples to further explore the impact of MALL and academic outcomes. Such investigations will be essential in refining mobile learning strategies and ensuring their relevance and effectiveness across varied educational landscapes. This study also suggests research into app-based ELL and blended learning pedagogy for sustained learner engagement.

Data availability: Data produced or examined during this study are available from the author upon request.

Declaration of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics statement: Data collection and analysis of collected data were conducted with the consent of all participants in the study. They were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

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