Articulo original

Writing Skill Training of tertiary students by using Letter Writing on All Topics App

Entrenamiento de la escritura en estudiantes universitarios mediante la aplicación Letter Writing on All Topics

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ABSTRACT

Writing in English is a productive skill, more difficult for students to manage than perceptive skills as reading and listening. Therefore, the more resources teachers provide students with to strengthen writing the better. The paper's aim is to initially analyze the training of pre-intermediate level tertiary students by using the Letter Writing on All Topics application. A poll, Iadov technique, documental analysis, descriptive statistics, and MapALL analytical approach are used as tools and methods. The study conducted achieves positive results, showing greater improvement of students' writing skill by using the app. Hence, mobile learning has turned into an outstanding and efficacious teaching resource for learning foreign languages.

Keywords: writing; skill; mobile; learning; students.

RESUMEN

La escritura en inglés es una habilidad productiva, más difícil de dominar para los estudiantes que las habilidades perceptivas como la lectura y la comprensión auditiva. Por ende, cuantos más recursos proporcionen los profesores a los estudiantes para fortalecer la escritura, mejor. El objetivo del trabajo es analizar preliminarmente el entrenamiento de los estudiantes universitarios de nivel pre-intermedio con el empleo de la aplicación móvil Letter Writing on All Topics. Se utilizan como herramientas y métodos: la encuesta, la técnica Iadov, el análisis documental, la estadística descriptiva y el enfoque analítico de MapALL. El estudio realizado obtiene resultados positivos, se percibe una mejoría notable de dicha habilidad en los estudiantes al utilizar la aplicación. Por consiguiente, el aprendizaje móvil se ha convertido en un recurso didáctico excepcional y eficaz para el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: expresión; escrita; aprendizaje; móvil; estudiantes.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile learning or m-learning has been gaining followers all over the world. That trend occurs not only because of the tremendous breakthrough of technology in the 21st century, but also grounded in the current global Covid-19 crisis. Nowadays, various countries have suspended classes due to the novel coronavirus, so students are likely to use educational mobile applications for not losing track of their school training. However, educational apps, particularly those teaching foreign languages have appeared before the coronavirus outbreak. According to Rosman (2008), the emergence of m-learning within tertiary education may have started with the innovation of mobile technology and web learning platforms, which paved the way for delivering educational content and learning experiences via mobile devices such as mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and iPods. Many authors support the potential apps have on language learning, so are the cases of: (Alexiadou, 2022; Andersen, 2019; Fouz-Gonzalez, 2020).

Most researchers have conducted studies based on the Mobile Assistance Language Learning (MALL) approach to find out apps' advantages and shortcomings from the pedagogical point of view. Nevertheless, MALL approach does not include set patterns to follow. Hence, experts can indistinctively measure the quality and features of mobile applications for language learning using different indicators, mainly focusing on student-centered learning. "More general and theoretical frameworks for MALL have predominantly been focused on student-centered learning" (Lindaman & Nolan, 2015, 4). By using MALL, students can learn anytime and anywhere without pressure.

Students using mobile language apps can learn foreign languages everywhere and every time as assured by these authors "[…] both fluid learning contexts (eg, formal, informal, in-class and out of class settings) and mobile technologies influence each other and continuously alter each other" (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018, 215).

Nonetheless, m-learning still shows some limitations as small screen size and a general lack of pedagogically tested apps. Despite those difficulties, MALL enhances students self-confidence and ownership as some authors wisely noted, "It permits students to decide their own learning processes" (Banister, 2010:121), and "Students are increasingly taking ownership of their own education" (Mitra, 2005, 71).

Before making decisions on what educational mobile applications are viable to include as language learning resources of English course programs, teachers should examine them focusing on the aforementioned approach. Currently, in post Covid-19 pandemic times, the University of Havana including the Higher Institute of Applied Sciences and Technologies (InSTEC) has endorsed the use of ITCs to strengthen the teaching-learning process. Therefore, teachers from Languages Department at InSTEC have studied several apps to find out the most adequate for students to practice out of classes the English contents that are going to be assessed in their certification exams.

In addition, the most concerning issue for teachers is that students gain all skills required to approve B1 examinations, which are compulsory for their final graduation. Regarding the contents tested, students face most difficulties in writing, particularly letters. Thus, the paper's aim is to initially analyze the training of pre-intermediate level tertiary students by using the Letter Writing on All Topics app.

THEORETICAL REFERENCE

The research is based on Guo (2014)'s new perspective of MALL approach. This author made some changes to Kim et al.'s (2012) analytical MALL framework. He aimed at broadening its scope, integrating pedagogical characteristics, and learning theories and paradigms, naming his as analytical framework of Mobile-apps Assisted Language Learning

(MapALL). Guo's approach comprises four main categories: Target Learners, Content and Focus, Theoretical and Pedagogical Features, and Reputation. The first category seeks:

> […] to identify intended users' profile including age, interest, and English language proficiency level. Content and Focus examine each app's learning materials and its structure in addition to whether it focuses on pronunciation, speaking skills, or sociolinguistic aspects. Theoretical and Pedagogic Features cover three elements, instructional activities, individual exercises, and learning theories and paradigms. Reputation includes download count, users' average rating, and their comments. (Guo, 2014, 32)

Meanwhile, for students to gain B1 proficiency level, the English tertiary program encompassed these goals concerning writing skills:

- Write well- structured and coherent texts, which can be also concise, using some wide vocabulary and a limited range of complex grammar structures.
- Write letters using simple information of immediate relevance for friends, service personnel, teachers and others, communicating in a comprehensible way.
- Write letters accepting apologies and apologizing for, requesting, and giving advice.

The aforementioned aims were consistent with the contents tackled in the Writing Letter on All Topics app as it is further seen in this article.

METHODOLOGY

Approach

The current research has been based on a mixed approach since it relies on analyzing pedagogical features and averaging results from a poll out. The paper reaches a descriptive scope since it details the characteristics of the app, and it depicts students' reactions to the mobile application.

Study Population

The study population was 300 pre-intermediate level tertiary students from Meteorology, Nuclear Physics, Radiochemistry and Nuclear Engineering majors. The paper's author requested their consent to publish their opinions.

Recollection techniques

First, the Letter Writing on All Topics app had been shared to the 300 students. Weeks later, a poll containing three closed and two open questions was carried out to measure students' satisfaction with the use of the Letter Writing app. Its outcomes were assessed by means of the Iadov technique, which comprises six levels of satisfaction, from one to six, depending on individual answers. Furthermore, the Group Satisfaction Index was calculated, providing five values whose meanings are displayed below:

Table 1. Five values of the Iadov technique

Scale	Meaning
+1	Clear satisfaction
+0,5	More satisfied than dissatisfied
0	Not defined or contradictory
-0,5	More dissatisfied than satisfied
-1	Clear dissatisfaction

Source: (Batista, 2018)

In addition, it was analyzed the app's features through the guidance on the four categories of Guo (2014)'s MapALL approach, which was pivotal to deeper examine it from a pedagogical point of view.

RESULTS

After having shared the Letter Writing on All Topics app, 282 students out of 300 used it, representing 94 percent. The outcomes of the first three poll questions using Iadov technique revealed that 50 percent of the study population feels a clear satisfaction with the Letter Writing on All Topics app and 40 percent said to be more satisfied than dissatisfied. Just 6.6 percent reflected to feel more dissatisfied than satisfied, and the answers of the 3.3 percent turned out not defined. As the ensuing Table 2 shows:

Table 2. Poll's results in Iadov quadrant

| 3. Do you think that the Letter Writing on All Topics app satisfies your linguistic needs for learning English?	1. How often do you study by yourself with the Letter Writing on All Topics app?								
	NEVER			SOMETIMES			ALWAYS		
	2. How would you value the mobile application's quality?								
	Good	Acceptable	Bad	Good	Acceptable	Bad	Good	Acceptable	Bad
It satisfies me a lot	2	2	6	1	**2**	6	**1**	1	6
It satisfies me more than what it dissatisfies me	2	2	6	2	2	6	2	2	6
It is indifferent for me	3	3	3	3	**3**	3	3	3	3
It dissatisfies me more than what it satisfies me	6	4	5	6	**4**	5	6	4	4
It does not satisfies me at all	6	5	5	6	6	4	6	5	4
I do not know what to say	3	3	4	2	2	3	2	2	3

Source: (Batista, 2018; own creation).
The colored numbers were the ones chosen by the study population.

Table 3. Results of the study population's individual satisfaction with the Letter Writing on All Topics app:

Results	Amount	%
Clear satisfaction	150	50%
More satisfied than dissatisfied	120	40%
Not defined	10	3,3%
More dissatisfied than satisfied	20	6,6%
Clear dissatisfaction	-	-
Contradictory	-	-

Source: (Own creation)

Fig.1. Poll's individual outcomes
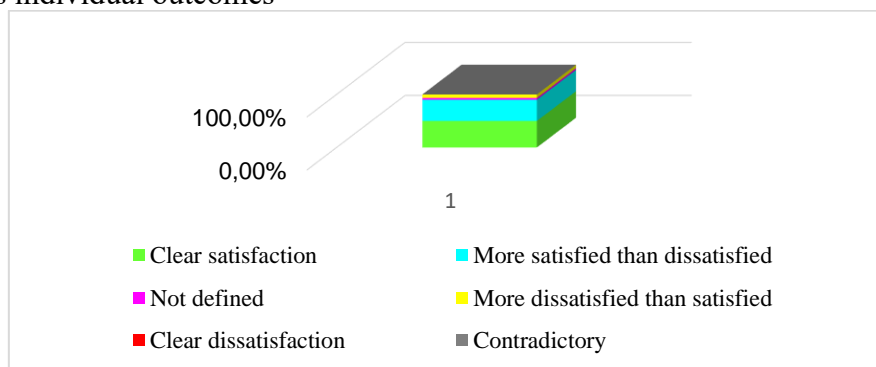
Source: (Own creation)

Taking into account the previous data, the study population's different levels of satisfaction are associated with a numerical scale oscillating between +1 and -1 to calculate the Group Satisfaction Index, as it is explained in the Table 4 below:

Table 4. Data to calculate the Group Satisfaction Index

Scale	Meaning	Individual Satisfaction
+1	Clear satisfaction	150
+0,5	More satisfied than dissatisfied	120
0	Not defined or contradictory	10
-0,5	More dissatisfied than satisfied	20
-1	Clear dissatisfaction	-

Source: (Own creation)

The Group Satisfaction Index is calculated following the formula:

$$ISG = \frac{A(+1) + B(+0,5) + C(0) + D(-0,5) + E(-1)}{N}$$

In this formula A, B, C, D, E represent the number of subjects with the individual index 1; 2; 3 o 6; 4; 5 and N represents the total of the study population, thus:

$$ISG = \frac{150(+1) + 120(+0,5) + 10(0) + 20(-0,5)}{300}$$

$$ISG = \frac{150 + 60 + 0 - 10}{300} = 0,66$$

The study population's Group Satisfaction Index concerning the use of the mobile app was calculated, which value was GSI=0, 66, a number that is within the satisfaction range (>0, 5) as it can be observed in Fig. 2:

Fig.2. Location of the study population's Group Satisfaction Index
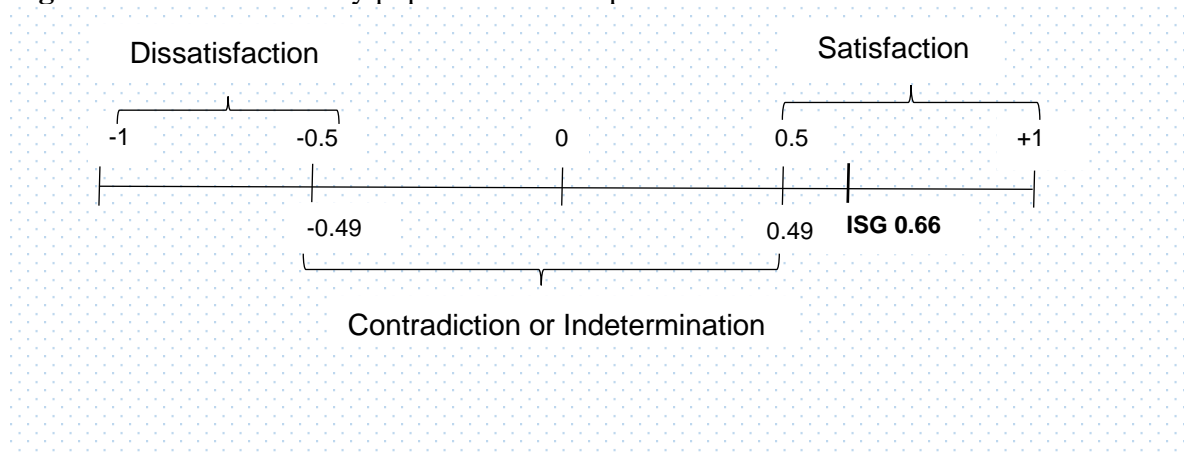
Source: (Own creation)

Regarding the fourth question, most of the study population deemed that the app addressed a vast number of noteworthy issues. However, some considered that the Letter Writing on All Topics app could include letter templates discussing on requesting awards or supporting the approval of innovations.

The majority responded to the poll's fifth question that using the mobile application helps them to improve their writing letter proficiency. A few answered that their learning was not that fast as they wish because they did not count on teachers to check their work.

MapALL ANALYSIS OF THE LETTER WRITING ON ALL TOPICS APP

Target Learners
Age: Teenagers, youngsters, and adults, in general.

Interest: this app is intended for students' independent study and self-preparation in the English subject. It is particularly aimed at helping users know the different types of letter writing formats and the correct structure of a letter in English.

Proficiency level: the app is designed for pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced students. They are more independent and proficient users; noticing the app is written in English, including the explanation on how to write a letter.

Content and Focus
Topic/Theme: Letter writing
Structure:
Letter Templates
Letter Writing Guide
Letter Sample
Banking Letter Samples
Thank you Letter Samples
Content size: The contents are grouped in an arranged and predictive way. The explanation on how to write letters is very clear and easy to understand, supported by a considerable amount of templates and samples.
Letter Writing Templates: in this section, users will find templates containing the structures used in each type of letter as follows:
Business Letter Template
Cease and Desist Letter Template
Character Reference Letter Template
Complaint Letter Template
Condolence Letter Template
Cover Letter Template
Employee Termination Letter Template
Employment Verification Letter Template
Friendly Letter Template
Job Interview Thank You Letter Template
Letter of Intent Template for a job
Letter of Intent Template for Graduate School
Letter of Recommendation Template
Reference Letter Template
Resignation Letter Template
Thank You Note Template for a Gift
Letter Writing Guide: This section will help users know important elements when writing each type of letter. It is divided into the following:
How to write a letter
Types of letters
Business Email Writing
Common Mistakes in Letter Writing
Cover Letter Writing
Differences between Formal and Informal Letters

How to Write a Business Letter
How to Write a Cancellation Letter
How to Write a Complaint Letter
How to Write a Condolence Letter
How to Write a Farewell Letter to your Co-workers
How to Write a Formal Letter
How to Write a Friendly Letter
How to Write a Letter of Interest
How to Write a Resignation Letter
How to Write a Thank You Letter After an Interview
How to Write an Address Change Letter
How to Write an Apology Letter
How to Write an Appeal Letter
How to Write an Invitation Letter
Letter Writing Rules
Letter Writing Tips
Requesting a Letter of Recommendation
Writing a Letter of Recommendation

Letter Samples: this section constitutes an extension of the Templates Section in which users will find the structures of the letters already written in a social context as real samples. It comprises the following issues:
Address Change Letter to a Bank
Business Condolence Letter
Company Address Change Letter
Effective Job Application Cover Letter
Examples of Formal Letters
Examples of Informal Letters
Insurance Cancellation Letters
Letter of Application – different versions
Military Condolence Letter
Request Letter
Sample Apology Letter (Business)
Sample Apology Letter to Professor
Sample Apology Letter to Teacher About Homework
Sample Business Letter
Sample Class Activity Suggestion Letter
Sample Complaint Letter
Sample Cover Letter
Sample Critical Letter to Classmate
Sample Critical Letter to Coworker
Sample Farewell Letter
Sample Interview Thank You Letter
Sample Invitation Letter (Business)
Sample Letter Asking Employer for Extension
Sample Letter Asking for Extension After Retirement
Sample Letter Asking Teacher for Extension
Sample Letter from Female to Male
Sample Letter from Male to Female
Sample Letter of Appeal

Sample Letter of Interest
Sample Letter of Recommendation
Sample Letter to Publisher
Sample Letter to Teacher About Problem
Sample Protest Letter to Manager
Sample Resignation Letter
Sample Semi Formal Letter
Sample Teacher Apology Letter
Sample Teacher Appreciation Letter
Sample Welcome Letter to Parents for Back-To-School
Teacher's Letter to Parents
Wedding Cancellation Letter

Banking Letter Samples: they are related to the banking area, as their titles described:
Bank Authorization Letter for Travel
Enclosing Cheques for Insurance
Write a Letter requesting changing the beneficiary of an existing policy
Write a Letter to the Regional Manager of Bank requesting for a loan for further studies.
Write to the Bank requesting a copy of your Bank Statement

Thank you Letter Samples: it only contains one sample:
Sample Thank You Note for a Job Offer
Focus: the app is goal-centered on writing skill and sociolinguistic aspects. However, in an indirect way, when analyzing the letters, users will also be strengthening the reading skill through the understanding of what they read.

Theoretical and Pedagogic Features
Learning theories and Paradigms
The Letter Writing on All Topics app is likely to follow a *Behaviorist learning* theory, which outlines as a learning mechanism the association of stimuli and answers by means of conditioning. The fact that society is humanly computerized mastering the ICTs is an essential element of this learning theory. Many people find it easier and more amusing to study with an app they have at hand, which constitutes in itself, a stimulus when learning.

Pedagogic features of the mobile application are focused on the student-centered approach since all examples and exercises are directed to students' needs. It is also based on the communicative approach because users learned how to enhance their writing skill by practicing different language functions.

As one of the outstanding benefits of m-learning is ubiquity, that characteristic triggers informal and lifelong learning because students can study everywhere at any time. Nonetheless, students can reinforce their curriculum contents but without having pressure in the case teachers do not give instructions in their classes for using the Letter Writing on All Topics application.
The mobile application's creators took into account Constructivist Learning grounded in the app helps to generate and enlarge learning experiences that stimulate users to the construction of knowledge with autonomy and responsibility. The acquisition of knowledge is reflected as an authentic construction operated by users themselves.

It does not possess instructional activities, such as tutorials on how to use different sections, but it is not strictly necessary thanks to its predictive and easy-to-use interface. Even though the app does not have typical individual exercises, it does have some activities because its templates include some gaps that students can fill in using their own information, making samples and templates points of departure for users to start writing their own letters.

Reputation

India's MBDevApps Company launched the Letter Writing on All Topics app on August 20, 2020. Nowadays, it is part of All Indian Apps Company, and it was last updated on June 18, 2021, reaching 3.6 average rating and counting 258 users' reviews in Google App Store.

Download count: 100 K+

CONCLUSIONS

The current paper has been an initial stage to prove that the Letter Writing on All Topics application helps train students, so they gain further writing proficiency and self-independence. In addition, the research paved the way for teachers to rely more on mobile learning, which is one of the leading strategies nowadays because of an upwards trend in computerization of society, in general.

The poll unfolded that most users were happy with the app, according to the Group Satisfaction Index value, which was 0.66, representing clear satisfaction with the Letter Writing on All Topics app. It also revealed that the app's creators could improve templates and samples in a near future by adding other communicative functions, such as writing letters aimed at requesting awards or supporting innovations.

Meanwhile, the MapALL analytical approach aids to initially examine the Letter Writing on All Topics app, considering pedagogical criteria as learning theories and paradigms, target learners, content, and focus. Furthermore, teachers learned significant aspects to take into account when choosing an app as a resource material for students to learn English.

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