Bridging the Digital-Linguistic Divide: Smartphone Use and English Language Engagement among Undergraduate Students in Nashik City

Sayali Sunil Bachhav

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Department of English,Loknete Vyankatrao Hire Arts Science & Commerce College Nashik Maharashtra India
Email: smbachhav112211@gmail.com

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Address for correspondence:
Sayali Sunil Bachhav
Department of English,Loknete Vyankatrao Hire Arts Science & Commerce College Nashik Maharashtra India
Email: smbachhav112211@gmail.com

Abstract

Smartphones have become a primary medium through which undergraduate students encounter English in their everyday lives; however, increased digital exposure does not necessarily result in effective language development. This study explores patterns of smartphone use and examines their relationship with English language engagement among 300 undergraduate students enrolled in arts, science, and commerce colleges in Nashik City, Maharashtra. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring smartphone dependency indicators and modes of English language use. The analysis utilised descriptive statistics and simple correlation techniques. The findings indicate that while most students frequently engage with English through listening-based activities such as video viewing and social media interaction, participation in productive language practices including writing, sustained speaking, and academic reading remains comparatively limited. Higher levels of smartphone dependency were associated with reduced engagement in academic English activities, diminished reading habits, and lower classroom participation. The study identifies a digital–linguistic divide in which widespread technological access facilitates passive consumption of English rather than purposeful language production. The findings suggest that unguided smartphone use tends to reinforce receptive engagement at the expense of productive competence. The paper therefore argues for the adoption of TPACK-informed pedagogical approaches that enable teachers to channel students' everyday digital practices toward structured, goal-oriented English language learning.

Keywords: *English Language Teaching, Smartphone Use, Digital Engagement, Undergraduate Students, Nashik City*

Introduction

In the Indian higher education system, competence in English plays a decisive role in students' academic progress and future career opportunities. As English continues to function as the dominant language of instruction and professional communication, undergraduate learners are expected to develop balanced proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Alongside formal instruction, language exposure increasingly occurs through digital means, particularly via smartphones.

Smartphones now represent the most frequently used digital devices among Indian students, offering continuous access to English-language videos, social media platforms, online news, and entertainment content. According to research, smartphones are an important route for learners' exposure to English outside of conventional classroom settings (Pandey & Sharma, 2023; Kaur & Sharma, 2015). Despite this increased exposure, improvements in academic language performance are not always evident. Digital interaction with English often remains informal and unstructured, limiting its educational impact.

In urban settings such as Nashik City, widespread smartphone access coexists with uneven levels of academic language proficiency. Educators frequently report that students' high engagement with English through digital platforms does not correspond with improvements in formal writing, structured speaking, or critical reading. This mismatch points to a digital–linguistic divide, wherein technological access alone fails to support productive language development. The present study therefore examines smartphone usage patterns and their relationship with English language engagement among undergraduate students in Nashik City.

Review of Literature

Research conducted in India suggests that while smartphones significantly increase learners' exposure to English, they do not consistently contribute to the development of productive language skills. Research suggests that undergraduate students predominantly use smartphones for entertainment, messaging, and social networking, rather than for academic learning purposes. (Kaur & Sharma, 2015; Davey & Davey, 2014).

Several studies have also linked excessive smartphone use to impaired concentration, poor reading habits, and academic distraction (Gupta & Bashir, 2018). Pandey and Sharma (2023) argue that digital literacy alone is insufficient to support academic language growth unless accompanied by instructional guidance. International research similarly demonstrates that informal digital exposure supports listening and vocabulary development but has limited influence on speaking and writing skills in the absence of pedagogical structure (Lee, 2024).

Effective teaching, according to the Technological Pedagogical subject Knowledge (TPACK) framework, depends on the integration of technology with instructional goals and subject knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Without such integration, smartphone use in higher education may reinforce passive engagement rather than foster active language production.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate patterns of smartphone use and their relationship with English language engagement among undergraduate students.

Sample

The sample comprised 300 undergraduate students, including both male and female participants, drawn from arts, science, and commerce colleges located in Nashik City, Maharashtra. The participants were aged between 18 and 23 years and represented diverse academic streams within higher education.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using two primary instruments. The first was a Smartphone Usage and Dependency Questionnaire, designed to capture information related to daily screen time, usage patterns, dependency indicators, and study-related distraction. The second was an English Language Engagement Inventory, which assessed students' use of smartphones for English language activities, including listening, reading, speaking, writing, and academic purposes.

Validation of Instruments

The research instruments were validated through expert review by senior faculty members from the Department of English. To ensure clarity, reliability, and relevance, a pilot study was conducted with 30 undergraduate students who were not included in the final sample. The pilot test results validated the clarity of the items, and minor changes were made before administering the instruments to the entire sample.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered in person during regular college hours with prior permission from institutional authorities. Participants were told of the study's purpose, and their consent was acquired. All data were collected with strict assurances of anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques suitable for English language education research. Percentages and mean scores were used to summarise smartphone usage patterns and language engagement levels. Simple correlation patterns were examined to explore relationships between smartphone dependency indicators and English language engagement.

Results

The study's findings are provided in three tables: smartphone usage patterns, dependency-related behaviours, and patterns of English language engagement among undergraduate students. Key interpretations are provided following each table.

Table 1. Smartphone Usage Patterns among Undergraduate Students (N = 300)

Parameter	Category	Students (%)
Average daily screen time	< 2 hours	29
	2–4 hours	44
	> 4 hours	27
Most common time of use	Evening	31
	Night	39
	Late night	22
Primary purpose of use	Communication	86
	Social media	64
	Entertainment	49
	Academic learning	24

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 within categories due to multiple responses.

Smartphone use is quite common among undergraduate students, with around 73% reporting daily screen time surpassing two hours. Use is concentrated during evening and nighttime hours. While smartphones are heavily utilized for communication and social interaction, academic-oriented use remains comparatively limited **(Table 1).**

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Table 2. Smartphone Dependency Indicators and Learning Behaviour

Indicator	Students Reporting (%)
Restlessness without phone	51
Difficulty limiting usage	43
Phone use before sleep	77
Sleep disturbance	45
Reduced textbook reading	41
Study distraction	54

Dependency-related tendencies were detected, with more than half of the students reporting restlessness without access to their phones and difficulty restricting usage. High rates of pre-sleep phone use (77%) and associated sleep disturbance (45%) coincide with reports of reduced textbook reading and study distraction, indicating a close association between smartphone dependency and reduced academic focus **(Table 2).**

Table 3. English Language Engagement through Smartphones

English Skill Area	Engages Often/Very Often (%)	Engages Rarely/Never (%)
Listening (videos, reels)	72	28
Reading (news, captions)	48	52
Speaking (voice notes, discussion)	34	66
Writing (posts, summaries)	29	71
Academic English use	22	78

High involvement was defined as "often/very often," while low engagement was defined as "rarely/never." Receptive exposure is high, but productive and academic English use is restricted.

The pattern of English language engagement reveals a distinct skew toward passive, receptive activities. While a large majority (72%) frequently engages in listening through videos and reels, substantially fewer students regularly practice speaking (34%) or writing (29%). Academic use of English through smartphones remains particularly low, with only 22% reporting frequent engagement. These data indicate a clear dominance of consumption-based digital engagement over active language production **(Table 3).**

Discussion

The findings reveal a noticeable gap between students' frequent exposure to English through smartphones and their engagement in productive language practices. Although undergraduate students regularly interact with English-language digital content, this interaction is largely limited to receptive activities. Opportunities for structured speaking, writing, and academic reading are comparatively limited, supporting the argument that exposure alone is insufficient for language development (Swain, 2005).

Consistent with prior Indian studies, the findings show that excessive smartphone use encourages consumption-based engagement while lowering time spent on academic reading and writing (Kaur and Sharma, 2015; Davey & Davey, 2014; Gupta & Bashir, 2018). Pandey and Sharma (2023) agree that unguided internet involvement rarely results in academic language competency. According to research on casual digital learning, instructional scaffolding is critical for transforming incidental exposure into meaningful learning outcomes (Lee, 2024). When viewed via the TPACK framework, the data show that, while students have significant technological familiarity, they receive little pedagogical support for utilizing smartphones for intentional English learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). These findings point to the need for teaching strategies that purposefully align smartphone use with language learning goals. These findings highlight the need for instructional practices that intentionally link smartphone use with language learning objectives.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that widespread smartphone use provides substantial exposure to English but does not automatically promote productive language development. Undergraduate students predominantly engage with English through receptive digital activities, while writing, speaking, and academic reading remain underdeveloped. Excessive and unguided smartphone use therefore contributes to passive consumption rather than meaningful learning. These findings suggest a gap between access to digital tools and the development of linguistic competence. Addressing this gap requires pedagogy-driven integration of smartphones into English teaching, supported by TPACK-informed instructional practices.

Limitations

The study was conducted in a single metropolitan context (Nashik City) with a cross-sectional design; the results may not be applicable to rural settings or other locations. Furthermore, the study lacked objective measures of English language competency to support self-reported involvement patterns.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

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