

Teachers and Students' Perceptions of Smartphone Use in EFL Classes at SMAN 2 Sidrap

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

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This study investigated students' and teachers' perceptions of smartphone use in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at SMAN 2 Sidrap. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 eleventh-grade students and three English teachers, complemented by classroom observations. Student interview questions addressed smartphone policy, applications and features used for learning, understanding of materials, motivation and achievement, self-regulation, multitasking and comprehension, as well as distractions and teacher strategies. Teacher interviews focused on policy, supervision, behavioral changes, self-control, and curriculum effectiveness. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 Pro. The findings revealed that students generally held positive perceptions of smartphone use. Smartphones supported access to information, the use of learning applications and features (Google, Google Translate, YouTube, ChatGPT, Gemini, and digital dictionaries), comprehension of difficult materials, and increased motivation and engagement. However, distractions from social media, games, notifications, and unrelated activities remained a challenge. Students' self-regulation varied, and multitasking often reduced concentration and understanding. From the teachers' perspectives, smartphones could support learning when guided by clear policies and appropriate supervision. Teachers observed behavioral changes and varying levels of student self-control and considered smartphone use beneficial for curriculum effectiveness when aligned with learning objectives. The study concludes that smartphones have the potential to enhance EFL learning, motivation, comprehension, and achievement, yet their effectiveness depends on students' self-regulation, teachers' monitoring, and the alignment of device use with pedagogical goals.

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first-century digital era has transformed education in fundamental ways. Technology integration in classrooms is no longer optional but necessary for preparing digitally literate learners. Among digital devices, smartphones stand out because of their portability, multifunctionality, and relative affordability. In schools that adopt a technology-permitting policy, smartphones are increasingly viewed not merely as potential distractions but as possible learning tools, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Education itself functions as a system of social reproduction and cultural adaptation that continually evolves alongside technological change. Curriculum and instructional practice must therefore respond to the demands of a digitally mediated environment while remaining grounded in pedagogical purpose.

EFL learning at the secondary level requires the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Traditional textbook- and lecture-based approaches often limit students' exposure to authentic English, especially when physical resources are scarce. Learners frequently encounter difficulties related to grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, compounded by limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom and by instructional methods that emphasize memorization over communicative practice. Smartphones can expand access to online dictionaries, language-learning applications such as Duolingo or Memrise, video platforms such as YouTube, and interactive materials that support divergent and creative thinking. At the same time, their presence in class introduces risks of digital distraction through social media, games, and continuous notifications.

Preliminary observations at SMAN 2 Sidrap revealed a contradictory pattern. On the one hand, mobile devices facilitated quick access to digital learning resources such as e-textbooks and language applications. On the other hand, many students tended to shift attention to non-academic applications during lessons. This phenomenon suggests that the successful educational use of smartphones depends heavily on students' self-regulation and on effective instructional supervision. The digital divide often lies not in device availability but in pedagogical management of those devices. Students, as digital natives, may feel comfortable operating smartphones yet not necessarily know how to deploy them for serious academic purposes. Teachers, meanwhile, face the challenge of supervising digital classrooms so that social media and games do not displace learning activities.

Understanding the perceptions of both teachers and students is therefore a vital first step. Teachers' perceptions reflect pedagogical readiness and the instructional barriers they encounter, while students' perceptions indicate levels of engagement, motivation, and perceived usefulness. If teachers view smartphones merely as entertainment devices, they may be reluctant to integrate them into lesson plans. Conversely, if students experience smartphone use as either overly restrictive or confusing, the pedagogical potential of the devices may remain unrealized. This study aims to explore how both groups view smartphone use in EFL classes within a technology-supportive school environment and to identify conditions under which smartphones can optimally support learning.

Accordingly, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do students perceive their smartphone use and self-regulation during EFL classes? and (2) How do EFL teachers perceive smartphone use as a learning support tool and as a potential source of digital distraction in EFL classes? By examining both perspectives in depth, the research seeks to contribute theoretical insight into self-regulation and technology use in EFL settings and practical guidance for teachers, schools, and curriculum developers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception in Educational Contexts

Perception is a cognitive process through which individuals organize and interpret sensory information to give meaning to their environment. It involves selection, organization, and interpretation of stimuli and is shaped by knowledge, experience, and viewpoint. According to various scholars, perception integrates sensory data so that individuals become aware of their surroundings, including themselves, and subsequently form attitudes that guide behavior. In educational settings, perception strongly influences attitudes toward technology and subsequent classroom behavior. Differences in knowledge, experience, and viewpoint cause individuals to manifest different perceptions toward the same stimulus. Understanding this process is crucial because perception acts as a primary determinant of the attitudes and actions that teachers and students take in response to smartphone use in the classroom.

Smartphones as Learning Media in EFL

Smartphones equipped with operating systems and internet connectivity enable access to multimedia resources, digital dictionaries, translation tools, and language-learning applications. In EFL contexts, such devices can support vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation practice, listening exposure through authentic materials, and independent information searching. They can also facilitate the creation of language-rich environments in which learners engage in communicative activities beyond the constraints of printed textbooks. Features such as flexible access to documents, photos, videos, and audio files make smartphones practical tools for both in-class and out-of-class learning. Previous studies have reported generally positive student and teacher perceptions of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL).

Ningsih et al. (2022) found that secondary-school teachers held positive views of mobile technology trends and practices, citing motivation as a primary driver of integration. They also identified infrastructure issues, teachers' technological knowledge, and educational policies as challenges. Nuraini et al. (2020) reported that most students perceived MALL positively for supporting English classroom activities, although internet connectivity remained a major obstacle. Rosiva et al. (2022) observed high readiness among teachers and students regarding device ownership and basic skills for m-learning during the pandemic period, recommending further development of advanced skills. Kartika et al. (2024), employing a mixed-methods design with 150 educators and 215 high-school students, demonstrated relationships between the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Mobile Technology Impact (MTI) and noted some gender-related differences in perceptions of collaborative learning among students.

Despite these benefits, smartphones also introduce limitations. Distractions from social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, online games, and continuous notifications from messaging applications can impair concentration, reduce interest, and lower motivation. Students may be technically proficient with devices yet struggle to maintain academic focus amid the overwhelming flow of information and entertainment. Self-regulation—the capacity to remain committed to learning even without continuous external supervision—therefore becomes a critical moderating factor. The effectiveness of smartphone use in classrooms depends not only on perceived usefulness and ease of use but also on students' ability to manage attention and on teachers' capacity to design purposeful tasks and monitor device use.

Self-Regulation and Digital Distraction

Self-regulation refers to learners' capacity to plan, monitor, and control their own learning behavior. In technology-rich classrooms, self-regulation includes the ability to resist non-academic notifications, avoid multitasking that divides attention, and return focus to instructional tasks. Research on digital multitasking indicates that simultaneous engagement in academic and non-academic activities can reduce comprehension and retention. Consequently, positive perceptions of smartphone usefulness do not automatically translate into optimal

learning outcomes if self-regulation is weak. Teacher monitoring and clear classroom policies can scaffold students' developing self-regulatory skills while ensuring that device use remains aligned with learning objectives. The interplay between individual self-control and external supervision is therefore central to realizing the educational potential of smartphones in EFL classes.

Previous Studies and Research Gap

While earlier studies have examined perceptions of mobile technology through surveys and mixed-methods designs with relatively large samples, fewer investigations have provided in-depth qualitative accounts of both students' and teachers' lived experiences in a single technology-permitting secondary school. Kartika et al. (2024), for example, used mixed methods to obtain statistical insights into TAM and MTI, whereas the present study focuses on qualitative depth through in-depth interviews and observation. By limiting the scope to SMAN 2 Sidrap and emphasizing self-regulation and digital distraction alongside perceived usefulness, this study aims to offer a more contextual and experiential analysis of the real obstacles and opportunities that teachers and students encounter in their daily classroom lives.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design. The purpose was to provide an in-depth description of teachers' and students' perceptions of smartphone use as a medium for EFL learning at SMAN 2 Sidrap. Qualitative inquiry was selected because it allows exploration of subjective meanings, personal experiences, and classroom dynamics that cannot be fully captured through numerical measurement alone. The design enabled the researchers to assess perceptions of the role of smartphones while enriching findings with contextual insights into actual teaching and learning practices.

Participants and Research Context

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria indicating deep understanding of the research focus. The student sample comprised 15 eleventh-grade students who actively used smartphones during classroom learning activities and were willing to provide honest information about both academic use and instances of distraction by non-academic applications. The teacher sample consisted of three English teachers who had experience teaching in classes that utilized smartphone-based learning, who understood classroom dynamics and school policies regarding mobile devices, and who could provide insights into instructional approaches and classroom management related to digital distraction. The research site, SMAN 2 Sidrap, was chosen because the school permits the use of mobile devices on its premises, allowing the dynamics of technology use to be observed firsthand. Data were collected during the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. Sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation: once information from the three teachers and fifteen students became consistent and repetitive, with no significant new variations emerging, data collection was concluded.

Data Collection

Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, supported by relevant school documents. Source triangulation was applied by comparing interview data from teachers and students and by relating these accounts to observational evidence. Student interviews employed seven guiding questions covering smartphone policy, applications and features used for learning, understanding of materials, motivation and achievement, self-regulation, multitasking and comprehension, and distractions together with teacher strategies. Teacher interviews used five questions addressing policy, supervision, behavioral changes, self-

control, and curriculum effectiveness. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility so that informants could elaborate narratively and emergent data could surface. Classroom observations documented actual student behavior when using smartphones, including duration of academic focus and moments of switching to non-academic applications such as games or social media. Documentation of school technology policy, lesson plans, and related records provided additional contextual verification.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed thematically with the assistance of NVivo 12 Pro. Analysis followed the interactive processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data reduction, transcripts and field notes were selected, focused, and organized around themes related to ease of use, perceived benefits in English learning, and digital distraction. Presentation of data grouped findings according to research themes, enabling identification of relationships among phenomena. Coding generated seven student-related categories (Apps and Features Usage, Distraction and Teacher Strategies, Motivation and Engagement, Multitasking and Comprehension, Self-Regulation, Smartphone Policy, and Understanding Difficult Materials) and five teacher-related categories (Behavioral Changes, Curriculum Effectiveness, Monitoring, Policy, and Self-Regulation). Conclusions were continually verified through triangulation of interview findings, observational notes, and supporting theory until a high degree of confidence was achieved.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on interviews with students and English teachers as well as classroom observations, smartphone use in EFL learning at SMAN 2 Sidrap served two functions simultaneously: as a cognitive support tool and as a potential source of digital distraction. These dual functions are central to understanding how smartphones operate in a school environment that permits technology use.

Students' Perceptions of Smartphone Use and Self-Regulation

Students generally perceived the permission to use smartphones in EFL classes positively. They regarded the devices as useful because they provided immediate access to information not always available in textbooks or teacher explanations. Applications and digital features frequently mentioned included Google, Google Translate, YouTube, ChatGPT, Gemini, and digital dictionaries. Students used these tools to search for vocabulary, obtain translations, find examples, support pronunciation, and clarify difficult grammar or conceptual points. Among the coded categories, Understanding Difficult Materials and Apps and Features Usage received relatively prominent references across participants. Smartphones therefore functioned as supplementary learning resources that increased learner autonomy: rather than depending solely on the teacher, students could independently seek additional explanations when they encountered unfamiliar material. This condition relates to the concept of learner autonomy, in which learners take an active role in managing and supporting their own learning process.

Smartphone-supported activities were also associated with higher motivation and engagement. Several students reported that lessons involving digital tools felt more interesting and less monotonous. Interaction with text, audio, video, and interactive applications allowed them to encounter English in varied formats beyond traditional print materials. In EFL learning, such variety can be particularly useful because students can access authentic or semi-authentic digital materials in addition to textbook explanations. These findings align with earlier reports that mobile technology can enhance motivation and support learner autonomy in EFL settings.

Nevertheless, positive perceptions did not eliminate challenges. Categories related to

Distraction and Teacher Strategies, Multitasking and Comprehension, and Self-Regulation also appeared consistently in the coding results. Students acknowledged distractions from social media, games, chatting, notifications, and the behavior of classmates. Self-regulation varied across individuals. Some students reported being able to ignore notifications or refrain from opening unrelated applications; others admitted that they sometimes checked social media or engaged in non-academic activities, particularly when they felt bored. Multitasking—using the smartphone for several activities simultaneously—was frequently linked to reduced concentration and weaker understanding of the lesson. Rather than improving learning, switching between academic and non-academic activities may divide students' attention. Thus, the same device that served as a cognitive support tool could become a source of divided attention when self-regulatory capacity was insufficient.

In response to distraction, teachers employed monitoring strategies and, when necessary, temporarily collected students' devices. Students recognized these strategies as part of classroom management aimed at keeping smartphone use connected to learning objectives. The coexistence of perceived usefulness and recognized distraction underscores that the educational value of smartphones depends on how students regulate their own behavior and how teachers structure and supervise device use. Smartphones are most beneficial when students maintain a clear learning purpose and are able to control unrelated activities.

Teachers' Perceptions of Smartphone Use as Support and Distraction

Teachers did not reject smartphone use outright. Instead, they permitted devices when their use was relevant to learning activities—for example, accessing dictionaries or translation tools—and expected students to put them away once the academic purpose had been fulfilled. Classroom policy therefore functioned as a boundary-setting mechanism rather than as unrestricted freedom. For one teacher (T01), Policy was the most frequently referenced category, indicating particular emphasis on establishing clear rules. The teacher explained that smartphones were allowed when needed for instructional purposes and were to be put away or submitted when no longer required. For the other two teachers, the five categories—Behavioral Changes, Curriculum Effectiveness, Monitoring, Policy, and Self-Regulation—appeared with relatively similar levels of coding references.

Monitoring constituted a central management practice. Teachers observed students' on-screen activities and used visible engagement with learning tasks as an indicator of appropriate use. When devices were employed for unrelated purposes, teachers intervened through reminders, closer supervision, or temporary collection of the phones. Teachers also noted behavioral changes and varying levels of self-control among students. Older students were generally described as better able to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate use, yet guidance and monitoring remained necessary for the class as a whole. These findings are consistent with students' accounts of distraction: while some students were capable of regulating their own smartphone use, teacher monitoring remained important because self-regulation was not uniform among all students. Classroom management and student self-regulation should therefore not be viewed as separate factors; teacher guidance can support students in developing more appropriate patterns of technology use.

With regard to curriculum effectiveness, teachers considered smartphones beneficial when integrated into activities that required searching, evaluating, discussing, or applying information. Tools such as Google and interactive platforms (for example, Kahoot) were viewed as capable of increasing participation when tasks were clearly designed. Teachers reported that students could become more interested in discussing or reading information they had found themselves. This suggests that the role of the teacher is not simply to permit smartphone use but to design learning activities in which smartphone use has a clear academic function. Conversely, simply allowing devices without a defined academic purpose risked

increasing opportunities for distraction. Teachers therefore stressed the importance of aligning technology use with learning objectives and with students' characteristics.

Balancing Benefits and Risks in a Technology-Permitting Environment

The findings indicate that a school policy permitting smartphone use does not imply acceptance of all forms of device use. Rather, a process of selection and control operates to keep technology educationally productive. Effectiveness depends on the alignment among technology, learning objectives, students' self-regulatory capacity, and teaching strategies. Smartphones are more likely to function as cognitive tools when directed toward information searching, translation, language practice, assessment, and interactive tasks. They become sources of distraction when used for social media, games, chatting, or other non-academic activities. Teachers considered whether a given medium enabled students to participate actively in the learning process; when it did, smartphone use was judged beneficial.

These results are consistent with prior research that highlights both the motivational and instructional potential of mobile technology and the persistent challenge of digital distraction. The present study adds contextual depth by showing how students and teachers in a single technology-supportive Indonesian secondary school negotiate the dual role of smartphones. It also underscores that self-regulation and teacher monitoring are complementary rather than alternative factors. The presence of smartphones in the classroom does not automatically determine positive or negative learning outcomes; rather, outcomes are closely connected to how the devices are managed and used during the learning process. A purposeful switch to digital tools should respond to a specific learning need; after that need has been addressed, attention can return to the broader instructional flow. This sequence turns technology into scaffolding rather than substitution and encourages both teachers and students to evaluate their own device-related behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of smartphone use in EFL classes at SMAN 2 Sidrap. Students generally held positive perceptions because smartphones helped them access information, translate vocabulary, understand grammar and pronunciation, and experience more engaging lessons. At the same time, self-regulation abilities varied. Students recognized that notifications, social media, games, chatting, and multitasking could interfere with concentration, yet some still struggled to control their device use consistently. EFL teachers viewed smartphones as beneficial cognitive support tools when use was aligned with learning objectives. They implemented phone-permitting as directed and controlled technology use rather than unrestricted freedom. Strategies included collecting devices when not needed, monitoring activities, limiting usage time, providing clear instructions, and selecting media appropriate to students' needs. The balance between technological benefits and digital distraction was therefore achieved through the combined operation of students' self-regulation and teachers' classroom management.

Schools are advised to maintain policies that allow smartphone use while establishing clear educational guidelines and promoting digital literacy, technology-use ethics, and self-control. Teachers should integrate devices selectively on the basis of explicit learning goals, continue to monitor and scaffold students' self-regulation, and combine technology with conventional explanation, discussion, and student interaction so that smartphones function as supporting tools rather than sole sources of learning. Students need to develop the habit of using smartphones according to instructional purposes, distinguish academic from entertainment use, and employ AI-based applications and digital sources wisely to deepen understanding rather than to obtain instant answers. Prospective English teachers and teacher-education programs should strengthen competencies in digital pedagogy and digital literacy so that graduates can

select, evaluate, and integrate technology according to the needs of English language learning. Future research may expand the participant pool, examine schools with different characteristics or educational levels, or employ quantitative and mixed-methods designs to investigate relationships among self-regulation, academic achievement, motivation, engagement, digital literacy, and cyberloafing more comprehensively.

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