



CHAT AND LEARN: EFFECTIVENESS OF USING WHATSAPP AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL TO ENHANCE EFL LEARNERS' READING AND WRITING SKILLS



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ABSTRACT

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This study has examined the pedagogical role of WhatsApp as one of mobile-assisted language learning applications in developing motivational levels of Yemeni EFL learners to develop reading and writing skills. Twenty EFL undergraduate students of Aden University joined a WhatsApp English-medium chat group where they chatted, shared and commented on news articles in English for two months. Participants also took a pre-test and a post-test and responded to a questionnaire at the end of the study. Findings revealed that WhatsApp was a very effective application in developing students' motivation to improve their reading and writing skills. It helped them develop vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and writing. The study also revealed that WhatsApp was positively perceived by students as a pedagogical tool for their learning of English. The study concluded that WhatsApp English-medium groups provide students with opportunities for practising a natural language, especially in written communication, outside the classroom and motivate them to learn mutually. The study therefore recommends EFL teachers to utilize WhatsApp as a pedagogical technique and to encourage their students to create and join WhatsApp English-medium groups for natural interactions and contextualized language use that cannot be easily provided in traditional classrooms.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on mobile-assisted language learning by providing evidence for the pedagogical role of WhatsApp in enhancing EFL learners' reading and writing skills. The findings will help EFL teachers and students to recognize the value of utilizing WhatsApp in EFL teaching and learning, and the pedagogical role it plays in providing natural and contextualized language use opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the new fields of research in language learning and teaching is the use of mobile assisted language learning (MALL). There are many mobile applications that students can access today through their Smartphone and learn English through bilingual dictionaries, MP3s, videos, PDFs, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and web-based language learning sites. This new technology in language education is considered as a great development in the 21st century. In the past, foreign language learning was limited to classroom and textbooks but today information and communication technology has provided language learners with many applications and programs for developing their language through computers, internet, mobile Smartphone (Eslit, 2014; Zayed,

2016). These applications and websites provide students with opportunities for self-learning and can be used in and outside the classroom for practicing a foreign language and developing proficiency in it.

According to Oxford (1991); Savignon (1997) and Ahmed and Pawar (2018) communicative competence, in a foreign/ second language, can be developed through realistic interactions using meaningful and contextualized language. However, time provided by the classroom is not enough for practising language skills, and classroom itself is more institutionalized and cannot provide real contextualized language use and interactions. Therefore, there is a need to search for other alternatives that help students to interact in a natural situation and acquire a good level of communicative competence in the target language. The researcher believes that social media applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter can help to achieve such a goal as they provide a large space for discussions, interactions and free learning.

Based on these views and convictions, the researcher decided to examine the effectiveness of WhatsApp particularly on developing motivational levels to enhance reading and writing skills of 20 Yemeni EFL learners. This study was based on the premise that creating a WhatsApp group in English medium could be an easy and effective tool for motivating students to enhance reading and writing skills particularly and language proficiency generally. Such a WhatsApp group will provide students with great opportunities for practising English and learning from each other in a joyful, motivating and friendly way.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study aims at examining the pedagogical role of WhatsApp, as one of mobile-assisted language learning applications, in developing EFL students' reading and writing skills. It attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the pedagogical role of WhatsApp in enhancing Yemeni EFL students' motivation to develop reading and writing skills in English.
- To examine the effectiveness of WhatsApp English-medium groups in developing Yemeni EFL learners' reading and writing skills in terms of developing their vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and length of their writing.
- To investigate how Yemeni EFL students perceive WhatsApp as a pedagogical technique in their EFL learning.

1.2. Hypothesis of the Study

This study has the following two hypotheses:

1. WhatsApp can be used as a pedagogical tool for enhancing EFL students' motivation to develop reading and writing skills.
2. WhatsApp English medium groups used for chatting and sharing news articles in English can prove effective in developing students' reading and writing skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Today's students are known as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2007) or members of internet generation. This means that they use internet and digital technology devices such as computers and smart phones in many aspects of their lives including learning and studying. The field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has attracted many researchers during the last decades due to the technological advancement particularly the widespread of mobile phones. It has been acknowledged that mobile learning (M-learning) has a great value in various educational settings, e.g. collaborative learning (Hine *et al.*, 2004) independent learning (Bull and Reid, 2004) lifelong learning (Attewell and Savill-Smith, 2004) and English as foreign language learning (Liu *et al.*, 2008).

CALL and MALL are viewed as new developments in language learning and are supported by many online and offline applications that are effective in language learning. Many studies have dealt with CALL's effectiveness in language learning and have examined the problems related to CALL implementation. According to Warschauer and Healey (1998) CALL provides many benefits to language learning and teaching such as: "1- multimodal practice with feedback, 2- individualization in a large class, 3- pair and small-group work on projects, either collaboratively or competitively, 4- the fun factor, 5- variety in the resources available and learning styles used, 6- exploratory learning with large amounts of language data, and 7- real-life skill building in computer use"(p.59). On the other hand, there are some challenges that teachers and students encounter with CALL such as, the high price of computer, lack of internet, lack of training to use it and so on. These problems can be solved by MALL as mobile phones are cheaper in comparison to computers, more widespread and used around the world, easier to carry and used in spare time at different places, and last, but not the least, they are small in size and connected to the internet via a SIM-card. Miangah and Nezarat (2012) have asserted that "although learning through mobile phones may take longer time compared to computers, learners feel a greater sense of freedom of time and place, so that they can take the advantage of spare time to learn a second language when and where they are" (309). This study will survey some previous research studies dealing with using WhatsApp application in developing language learning.

Allagui (2014) has explored the effectiveness of WhatsApp instant text messaging on undergraduate students' writing skills. A group of 50 students were given a written assignment and were required to text messages to one another through WhatsApp messenger for the purpose of developing their writing skills. The participants then reported about their experiences through a survey after the completion of a writing assignment. Though students' holistic scores remained low, they seemed to have benefited from the spell checker as they received better scores in spelling and vocabulary. The results also showed that the use of WhatsApp in the classroom increased students' motivation to write.

Fattah (2015) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of using a WhatsApp messenger to develop students' writing skills of Saudi private university students. 30 students participated in the study where the experimental group (n= 15) used WhatsApp to develop their writing skills and the control group (n=15) was taught their writing skills through the prescribed book. Findings from pre-test and post-test showed that WhatsApp technique achieved significant effects on students' writing skills, i.e. the experimental group outperformed the control group.

Jafari and Chalak (2016) examined the role of WhatsApp in teaching vocabulary to Iranian EFL junior school students. 30 male and 30 female students participated in this study. The researchers used a pre-test and post-test to assess the students' vocabulary level before and after the study. The experimental group received vocabulary instructions, four days a week, for four weeks by using the WhatsApp while the control group was taught vocabularies of their textbook inside the classroom by traditional methods as was used in all Iranian schools for teaching English. The results revealed that using WhatsApp in teaching vocabulary had a significant role in vocabulary learning. The results have also shown that there was not a substantial difference between male and female students regarding their vocabulary knowledge after using WhatsApp.

Ta'amneh (2017) has studied the effect of using WhatsApp messenger on learning English among university students. The study was conducted on 40 students who were divided into a control group (21) and an experimental group (19). The findings showed differences in the achievements of two groups in favor of the experimental group. These differences indicate that integrating WhatsApp application in teaching English language improved the abilities of the learners of the experimental group.

Hamad (2017) has conducted a study to examine the use of WhatsApp in enhancing Saudi tertiary learners' writing in English. The participants in the study were 36 female students from 1st level who were studying the Listening & Speaking course in the 1st semester 2013-2014. The data was collected through students' questionnaire

and instructor's observation. Findings showed that using WhatsApp enhances students' learning and enthusiasm, helps them to develop English skills, enriches their vocabulary, and makes them learn from their mates' mistakes

Annamalai (2019) has explored the use of WhatsApp chat group as a platform for extending learning in a blended learning classroom with a small group of undergraduates in the Malaysian context. The aim of this study was to provide learners with the opportunity to reflect strengths and challenges of using WhatsApp as an extended learning platform. Findings revealed that a majority of students expressed the preference for WhatsApp in their reflections in spite of the problems they faced.

These studies have examined the effectiveness of WhatsApp on developing learning, language learning, vocabulary learning, writing and speaking. As not much has been done on Yemeni and Arab students, it will be a good study to replicate, test and validate similar findings in parts of Arabic speaking world where English is taught as a foreign language. This study, therefore, examines the effectiveness of WhatsApp on enhancing EFL learners' reading and writing skills with reference to Yemeni students of English. The researcher has assumed that WhatsApp is one of the most common social media applications used by Yemeni students and it can be exploited in their English language learning as it does not require such a high internet speed and can be easily installed and used by most students.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study presents a practical experience in which the researcher has examined the pedagogical role of WhatsApp in developing Yemeni EFL students' reading and writing skills in English as a foreign language.

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were twenty undergraduate students belonging to the English language department of Radfan College of education – University of Aden. They joined a WhatsApp group for developing their English, especially in reading and writing skills. All the participants were male as female students felt a little uncomfortable to participate in WhatsApp mixed-gender group and share their mobile numbers with their male classmates for social and cultural considerations.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

The data was collected through a pre-test and a post-test, researcher's daily observations of students' progress and a questionnaire given to the participants at the end of the study. The pre-test and post-test based on reading and writing tasks were given to students when they joined the group and later again at the end of the study period. Researcher's daily observations aimed at noticing students' progress in reading and writing. The questionnaire aided the researcher to examine students' opinions regarding the effectiveness of WhatsApp in developing their reading and writing skills based on the experience they had during the study.

3.3. Validity of Data Collection Instruments

To validate the data collection tools, the researcher sent the test, the questionnaire and the study plan to five EFL professors and requested their opinions on the study and on the capacity of tools in fulfilling the objectives of the study. Their recommendations and comments were taken into consideration in the final draft of the framework.

3.4. The Study

Twenty male EFL undergraduate students of Radfan College of Education, Aden, Yemen, were added to a WhatsApp group of English medium. The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of WhatsApp on enhancing students' reading and writing skills. In the first week, the researcher chatted with the participants about different issues related to their education, social and political issues in order to assess their reading and writing

skills. A pre-test was given to assess their current state of reading and writing skills. Subsequently from the second week onwards, articles from English newspapers were shared with students, almost one article per day, and they were asked to read and comment on their content or to paraphrase them in their own language. The rest of the time, the researcher and the members of the group exchanged chats and discussions about several issues informally. Most of the issues discussed in the group were personal issues, or issues related to education, social and political topics as the country was in a state of war and political unrest during the study. The researcher told the students to chat freely and to consider him as a group member and not as a teacher.

The researcher sent several questions, debates and news articles from time to time about the war situation, latest news, stories, students' education and activities and like to motivate discussions and to ensure that the group works towards the purpose of the study. During the course of the study, the researcher also observed students' progress in terms of grammatical accuracy, vocabulary development, length of writing and the comprehension of the text given to them. At the end of the study, the researcher requested the students to write an article about the war in Yemen and their views of the future to assess their writing, a task similar to what was given at the beginning of the study. One article was also given to them to read and answer questions related to it in order to assess their reading comprehension (post-test). For the purpose of triangulation and to check students' opinions about using WhatsApp as a pedagogical tool and its role in motivating them to learn and develop their reading and writing skills, participants were requested to respond to a questionnaire with reference to their experience with WhatsApp during the last two months.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

When comparing students' reading comprehension and writing skills in the first week and the last week of the study (pre-test and post test) as shown in Table 1 and Table 2, the researcher found a significant development in students' performance grammatically, lexically, in length of their writing and in their reading comprehension as well. This development reflects that WhatsApp chatting and other activities shared in the group helped them in improving their reading comprehension and writing skills. Students' vocabulary store had also improved by the end of the study as they used political terms and other vocabulary items in their writing more confidently and accurately. This development in vocabulary and writing supports (Jafari and Chalak, 2016) study of the effectiveness of WhatsApp in developing students' vocabulary and Fattah (2015) study in terms of WhatsApp's role in developing writing skills. In the first week of the study, only a few students were able to chat and write full sentences free of grammatical errors in English while the majority could only write short phrases full of grammatical errors. Participants' answers to reading pre-test also showed students' weakness in dealing with political terms and newspaper language as only few students who performed well in their reading test while the performance of the majority was 'poor' and 'very poor'.

Table-1. Students' categorization based on their performance in the pre-test.

Skills / Grade	Excellent	V. good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
Vocabulary	1	3	4	1	6	5
Grammar	2	2	4	4	4	4
Reading comprehension	1	2	3	4	6	5
Writing	0	2	3	4	7	4

Source: Participants' post-test.

Table-2. Students' categorization based on their performance in the post-test.

Skills / Grade	Excellent	V. good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
Vocabulary	6	4	4	3	2	1
Grammar	5	6	5	2	1	1
Reading comprehension	5	5	6	2	1	1
Writing	4	7	3	3	2	1

Source: Participants' post-test.

During the course of the study, the researcher also observed the progress that students achieved in their reading and writing skills while they corrected their errors and participated actively. It was also noticed that those students who performed poor were learning from their classmates of higher level and it was reflected in their use of vocabulary in their writing. The vocabulary used by the higher level students was found in the lower level students' writing within a few days only. This shows that WhatsApp group chatting helped the poor or lower level students to learn from the higher level students as they had opportunities to look at their writings and to learn from it. Such a shared learning is really too difficult for a traditional classroom to provide at such a high level.

In the last week of the study, the situation was completely different where most students could write comments and reports of paragraphs with an acceptable level of accuracy. Students were also able to read, comprehend and interpret news articles. This was reflected in their post-test and in their chats too. Such findings led the researcher to a conclusion that WhatsApp English-medium chats and other tasks shared with students through the WhatsApp group were of a great value in developing students' reading and writing skills. WhatsApp groups gave students opportunities for communication in English and enabled them to develop their grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing skills. It also provided them with opportunities for learning from each other and keeping English learning a continuous process outside their classroom.

Students' responses to the questionnaire as shown in Table 3, also supported the researchers' observations and test results. It was revealed that through their two months' experience with WhatsApp chatting and learning, students could express positive attitudes towards learning English through WhatsApp and that they considered WhatsApp English medium groups of high significance in developing their reading and writing skills and motivating their learning. They emphasized that WhatsApp chats and news articles shared via their WhatsApp group during the two-month study helped them a lot to learn new vocabulary and grammar, and to develop their reading and writing skills as a whole. They emphasized that WhatsApp group chats motivated them to learn from each other and provided them with space to practice English as a means of communication. They agreed and strongly agreed that chats and tasks they exchanged during this study were of a high significance in developing their reading and writing skills.

Table-3. Descriptive Statistics of students' questionnaire regarding their experience with WhatsApp for developing their reading and writing skills.

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I like to use WhatsApp for my language learning.	20	4.00	5.00	4.5000	.51299
Using WhatsApp for language learning is interesting and enjoyable.	20	4.00	5.00	4.7500	.44426
Using WhatsApp English medium groups is effective for developing reading and writing skills	20	3.00	5.00	4.1000	.85224
Using WhatsApp English medium group helped me to develop my vocabulary	20	3.00	5.00	4.3500	.58714
Using WhatsApp English medium group helped me to develop my grammar	20	3.00	5.00	4.3000	.73270
Using WhatsApp English medium group helped me to develop my reading comprehension	20	4.00	5.00	4.3500	.48936
Using WhatsApp English medium group helped me to develop my writing.	20	3.00	5.00	4.6000	.59824
Using WhatsApp English medium group helped me to learn from my friends.	20	4.00	5.00	4.3500	.48936
Using WhatsApp English medium group provide me time to practice my English.	20	3.00	5.00	4.4500	.75915
Using WhatsApp English medium groups motivates me to chat and learn.	20	3.00	5.00	4.6500	.58714
Using WhatsApp English medium groups makes me free to ask questions and learn.	20	3.00	5.00	4.3000	.65695
Using WhatsApp English medium groups provide me with more opportunities to practice language than a traditional classroom.	20	2.00	5.00	3.9500	1.09904
Valid N (listwise)	20				

Source: Participants' questionnaire.

When comparing their learning through WhatsApp group and their traditional classroom learning, participants emphasized that such chats, discussions and tasks given to them via the WhatsApp group during these two months were more effective in developing their reading and writing skills than classroom courses that they attended for a four-month semester. They added that such a WhatsApp group provided them more time to practice reading, writing and communicating in English as compared to their traditional classroom learning in which their teacher and few students participated in the practices while the majority of the students were just passive listeners.

However, it does not suggest here that there is no need for classroom learning and should be replaced by learning through WhatsApp but this study aimed to highlight the significance of WhatsApp as a learning tool in foreign language learning in order to create a variety of learning styles and strategies that help students to acquire a foreign language and to support communicative classroom learning. This study has highlighted above many advantages of utilizing WhatsApp as a pedagogical tool in foreign language learning, there are also some constraints that teachers should take into considerations when utilizing WhatsApp in foreign language learning. These limitations include unavailability of Wi-Fi connections for some students, internet expenses that students have to spend to access WhatsApp. In some contexts, female students might also not be willing to participate in mixed gender groups or to share their phone numbers with their teachers and male classmates due to social and cultural concerns. A few students might also misuse learning groups and disturb learning, or show lack of commitment to actively participate in WhatsApp learning and so on.

Based on the findings presented in this section, this study asserts the effective pedagogical role of WhatsApp in enhancing students' motivation to learn a foreign language and in developing written communication skills. It also stressed upon that WhatsApp as a learning tool provides students with great opportunities for learning a foreign language through using it in real communication and practicing it freely. The study has shown evidence that chatting and learning at the same time makes language learning more motivating, full of fun and enjoyable. It also helps students to learn from each other as each student presents his own unique style and his own language that may help other students to learn something new from others' experience.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the pedagogical role of WhatsApp, as one of the mobile pedagogical tools for language learning, in enhancing students' motivation to develop reading and writing skills. It has concluded that WhatsApp English-medium group is a very effective means to motivate Yemeni EFL students to develop reading and writing skills. It plays an effective role in developing their vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and length of their writing. WhatsApp is perceived positively by the students as a motivating pedagogical tool for developing learning of English and making language learning interesting and enjoyable. It provides students with good opportunities to practice English as a means of communication and helps them to learn from each other. For this reason, this study recommends EFL teachers to use WhatsApp English-medium groups as a pedagogical technique in their teaching of English and to motivate their students to join such groups for chatting and learning. The study also recommends future researchers to examine the pedagogical role of WhatsApp and other social media applications in developing each of the four language skills and in developing EFL students' language proficiency generally.

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