

Promoting WhatsApp for a Better Interaction in English Language Learning Classrooms

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Abstract

The impact of social networks in every sphere of people's life is a widely spread discussion as in social as in academic environments worldwide. Among the broad choices of social networks, WhatsApp is one of those which leads the on-line instant message communication today. For this reason, this experimental work highlights the functionality of using WhatsApp to keep in touch, steer, support and monitor students' learning progression in the target language as it creates a high interactive platform for learning in and outside the classroom. This research brings to the fore the guidelines to fruitfully use the app and its limitations, and in turn, presents the results of its implementation in an actual language learning class whilst the beneficial impact on the learners is strictly examined. Moreover, the students' feelings with regard to the use of this app for language learning achievements is analyzed under the view of a survey. Finally, this work pretends to encourage EFL teachers to implement the use of WhatsApp and contribute to the study of social networks use in classrooms to boost the teaching-learning process.

Key words: WhatsApp, social networks, EFL, language teaching, language learning

Introduction

Technology brings out -uninterruptedly- a bunch of new opportunities not just to socialize but also for learners to interact outside the classroom when they are committed and willing to learn. Further, it has impacted on the way teachers convey knowledge to their students nowadays, where the result of the rapid change brought by means of the internet has turned out in the demand for teachers to become more facilitators than instructors (Beldarrain, 2006). However, depending on the region or country, thousands of teachers are facing problems with overpopulated classrooms, it turns out for them a race against time, and in the majority of cases, frustration since the (too) short time to teach prevents them from the customization of the class. Indeed, the fact that learners need to be exposed to the language and exchange their gained experience in the target language.

Since the beginning of the internet generation, there has been a vague prediction of what it was going to cause, however, no one could really anticipate the impressive new era that was coming out. Agar (2004) wrote about the swift of text messages spread which was not predicted to source such tremendously viral effect worldwide, this judge was later supported by (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005).

In addition, involvement with this digital world seems to be linked to an increase in individualism which is also promoted by the media (McGlynn, 2010). However, using social networks might be very productive for everyone when there are policies which engage the students in a responsible use of it. Moreover, in several education institutions, students might see the speaking as their best means to show their use of the target language, and the classroom as their only room to be exposed to it as they do not find any real language implementation in their day-to-day life, which in turn gets them motivated.

Finally, teachers find it difficult to monitor outside-classroom students' tasks, as they lack the chance to buck up students' autonomous learning. For this reason, the present study is intended to demonstrate the high contribution of WhatsApp for a better interaction in EFL/ESL learning classrooms.

Materials

For the development of this experimental study, literature review was carried out to define pros and cons as well as limitations in the use of WhatsApp for English language learning purposes. For the data collection, a convenience sample was designed in which four classrooms that made up 42 learners at an educational center for university students were chosen. This type of sample was selected due to limitations in time, funding and course assignation as they are given randomly to teachers every two cycles of a three-months duration; therefore, this study was run by the teacher during the course of them. Prior to the application of the survey, the use of WhatsApp was boosted to find out the learners' attitudes and perception towards the use of this app when a correct use of it is performed. The questionnaire was adapted from the one performed by (MI & Meerasa, 2016) which embodies a selection of question subjected to validation methods. However, questions

were reorganized to meet the purposes of this research. Finally, conclusions on the results of the study were drawn.

Results & Discussion

Background

A study by Lilje, et al., (2017) showed a positive response by text messages users of a group of older persons in a manual therapy when using them as reminders. Lin, et al., (2016) based on the contribution by Steven & Liu (2010) found that whilst LLSNSs (Language Learning Social Networks Sites) foster the learners' excitement and motivation, they might get trapped by several factors during or after the completion of the tasks. For this reason, the implementation of LLSNSs entails both engaging the students and monitoring their work where possible. This criteria faces the one provided by Susilo (2014) who found both WhatsApp and Facebook potential positive benefits for teaching and learning, with emphasis in the development of discussions or supportive outside-classroom information.

Some studies have coalesced in the idea that whilst technology rapidly grows in the social networking field, language learners get more opportunities to be exposed to the language and interact with their classmates and teachers, but this process might bring along with several complications for teachers to succeed the sought goals if learners do not use social networks - when oriented - just for course purposes (Bouhnik, et al., 2014; Harrison, et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016; McGlynn, 2010).

Another study performed in an Arabic language teaching course by Ishtaiwa & Fayez (2013) showed the power of WhatsApp on instructional language interaction and analyzed its use upon three axes of interaction (student-student; student-content & student-instructor) and he found out that most of the students think it improves student-student interaction rather than student-teacher which placed the last.

On the other hand, some authors highlight just the positive and beneficial effects learners might get from any type of portable within or outside classroom online interaction and that most of them are willing to join a group with such characteristics as those who are involved in a social networks are likely to be good students (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Gómez &

Shafirova, 2016). In a recent article written by Murnane (2018) for the Forbes magazine, he asserted WhatsApp is not the leader in networking people. However, it is important to consider that in this study, it is the top social network for students to keep communicated.

In order to effectively use WhatsApp for language learning purposes, bearing in mind the discussion above and based on the main judgements stated on previews studies, some advantages and limitations regarding the incorporation of WhatsApp to English language learning contexts are outlined in this finding which must be subjected to future researches.

Table 1. Advantages and Limitations of using WhatsApp for Language Learning Purposes.

Advantages	Limitations
↘ improves global class interaction	↙ might get learners trapped by social interaction rather than course-based one (within the classroom)
↘ promotes students' willingness to learn the target language	↙ gets difficult to balance the language exchange between high-skilled and low-skilled learners
↘ facilitates learners' accessibility to real-time responses	↙ prevents the instructor from monitoring the source of information (use of translators, etc.)
↘ enables the whole class to participate in real-time language exchange	↙ might make learners addicted to SNs and get bored at doing paper or spoken-based class activities.
↘ permits the instructors to be supportive at the contents when outside the classroom.	↙ tempts learners to get distracted when developing an activity (outside the classroom)

*The table sums up the pros and cons teachers and students face when using WhatsApp as a supportive tool for language learning interaction.

Source: Self-reported information.

Principles for the use of WhatsApp as a tool for language teaching

On the other hand, although using WhatsApp for portable supportive teaching and learning seems to be a powerful tool, it shows constraints in the use as teachers are not merely instructors anymore and have become facilitators of the content available on the internet for students. In order to avoid misuse, Elias (2011) established the eight principles to use what he called M-learning (mobile learning). However, it involved on mobiles not just WhatsApp but also any type of self-directed learning through other sources like music, calls, text messages among others. The eight principles to promote a better learning environment are quoted below.

1. equitable use
2. flexible use
3. simple and intuitive
4. perceptible information
5. tolerance for error
6. low physical and technical effort
7. community of learners and support
8. instructional climate

Likewise, it might be assumed that WhatsApp is an influential tool which fosters the multidirectional interaction for language learning. Indeed, the effective use of it derives in learners' motivation but just if its use is oriented, guided under the teacher's policies and monitored by him in real-time and also if they show commitment to fulfill the rules. To this end, five core principles relying on the literature review are addressed for succeeding the course goals. They are suggested in this study as follows:

1. The use of WhatsApp is merely intended to the course purposes.
2. Supportive interaction to level low-skill students is required.
3. The development of tasks must rely on honesty, respect and compromise.
4. All the information shared by the WhatsApp group must be checked and analyzed.
5. Individual contribution is expected from all the members.

Aside from the discussion above McBride (2009) stated that “*in all possible SNS uses, a major challenge for the teacher will be to know how to attach a grade to participation*”. Hence, in cases where students get grades by the completion of tasks on the SNS, the learners will be subjected to the realization of the activities assigned by the teacher, however, the pressure on the use of the social-network will ensure the completion of the tasks but contrarily reduces the learners’ willingness to actively participate in the process of learning exchange.

Learners’ attitude towards the use of WhatsApp for enhancing language learning interaction within and outside the classroom.

During the development of the course, the learners were constantly demanded to share comments, thoughts, reflections and contributions to enhance the language learning within the four skills. Most of the content shared on the social network was related to tasks in relation to the day-to-day language content taught. However, relevant information such as news, videos and songs were regularly shared.

The learners’ groups considered in this study had a favorable willingness in regard to the use of WhatsApp for interaction as shown below:

Q1. *Did you like the WhatsApp group learning?*

Q2. *Do you think this mode of learning helps you to learn English on the go?*

Q3. *Did the teacher keep you posting with interesting but relevant information in English during the course?*

Q4. *Do you think that every mentor can connect to his students through WhatsApp?*

Q5. *Do you think the WhatsApp group promoted the students’ interaction during the course?*

Q6. *Would you suggest for a WhatsApp group for every course?*

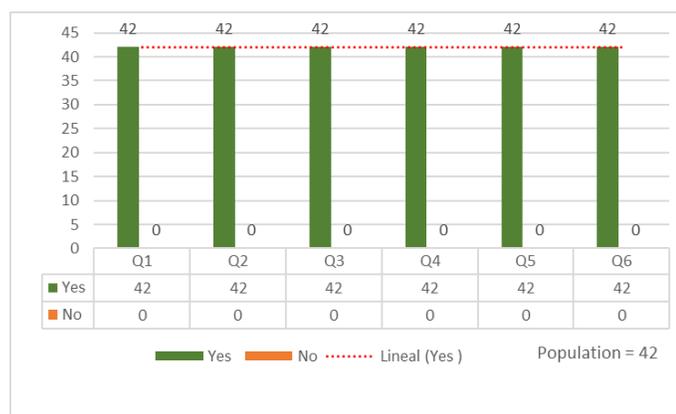


Figure 1. Dichotomic questions to observe the willingness of learners to use WhatsApp for language learning interaction.

Figure 1. The total number of learners surveyed indicated that they liked the use of this social network for course purposes and helps them to learn the target language on the go. Similarly, all of them pointed out that the teacher kept them posting information and

that every instructor must connect their students by this app. In addition, it was found in the learners' view that the use of WhatsApp promotes interaction within and outside the classroom and that they would suggest it for every course. Finally, the lineal tendency shows the high positive perception on the use of this social network.

The following chart displays the positive perception of the learners' group selected for this study where the majority of them indicated that this mode of learning is very good (figure 2).

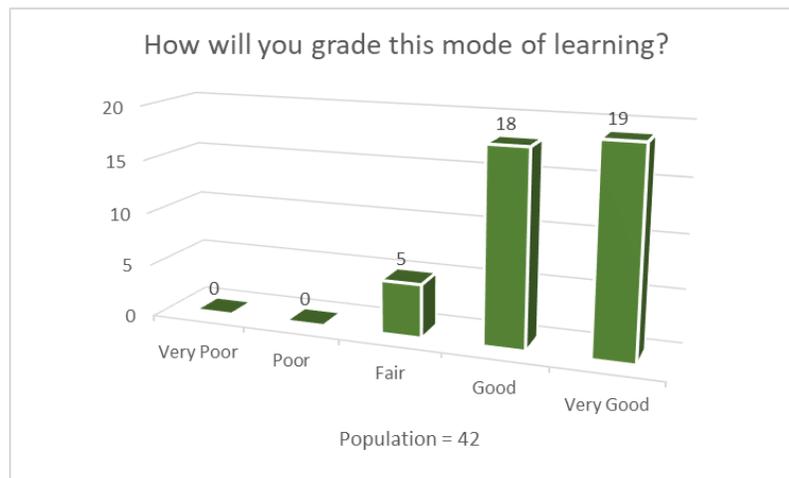


Figure 2. Students perception (graded) regarding the mode of learning.

On the other hand, in order to set a successful learning environment, the best time for students to feel comfortable at using the app was surveyed (Figure 3).

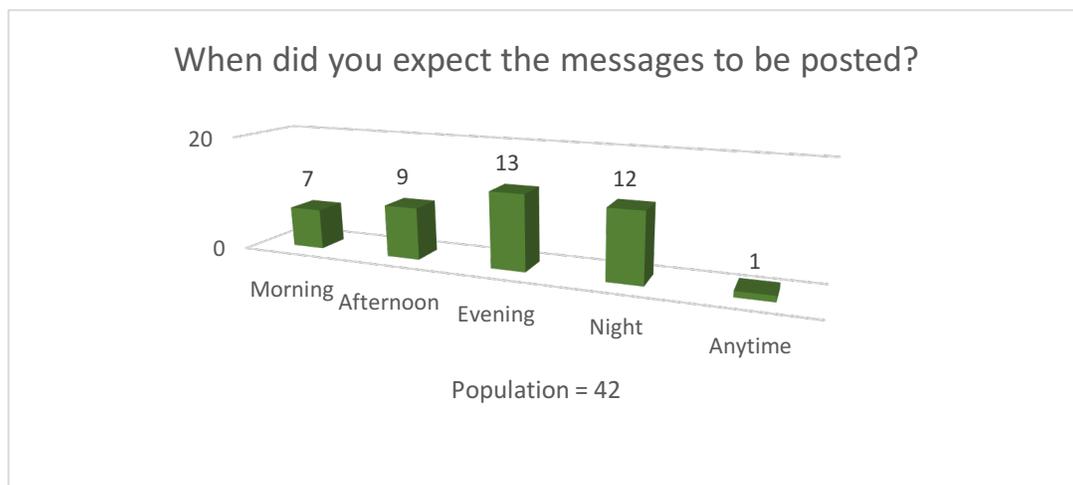


Figure 3. Time the students expect the messages to be posted.

Figure 3. The survey showed that the majority of learners expected the messages to be posted in the evening followed by night which indirectly addresses the fact that they are more available after midnight than in other parts of the day. However, it cannot be generally assumed that this fact is similar in every country or region, as it depends on the type of study program students are going through, why contextualization in other surveys is suggested.

Additionally, to find out the frequency learners used the app for course purposes, the following question was performed:

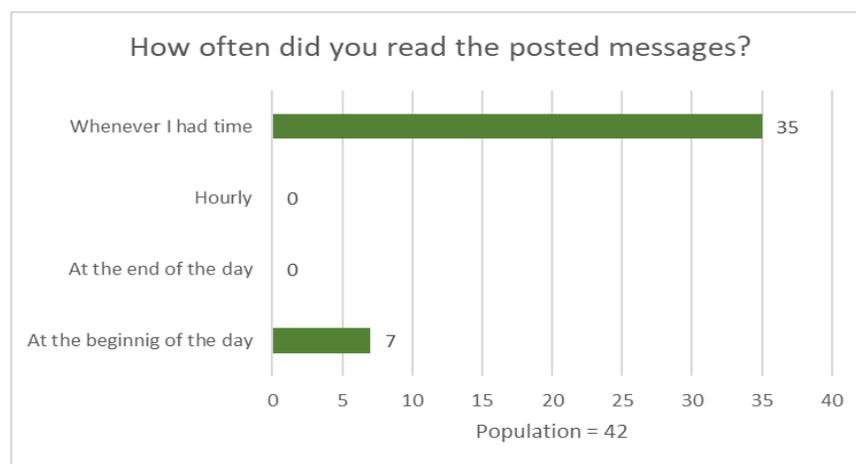


Figure 4. Frequency in which students read the posted messages.

Figure 4. The result of the survey displays that the big majority of learners read the posted messages when possible for them whereas a low representative minority indicated they do it at the beginning of the day. From this fact, it can be inferred that learners do not have a scheduled time to interact but whenever they find it better.

Comparative analysis of the contribution of WhatsApp for the learners' interaction within and outside the classroom.

Prior to this study, learners used to be members of a WhatsApp group in every class, it was merely used for the exchange of information about the activities addressed for in-classroom classes though. In this group, teachers were not commonly members or active members, and the app did not have an educational goal. It was necessary to analyze the

functionality of WhatsApp after being implemented, to this end, two questions (stated below) were inquired.

Q10. How often did you use to practice English outside the classroom before getting involved in the WhatsApp group?

Q11. How often did you use to practice English outside the classroom after getting involved in the WhatsApp group?

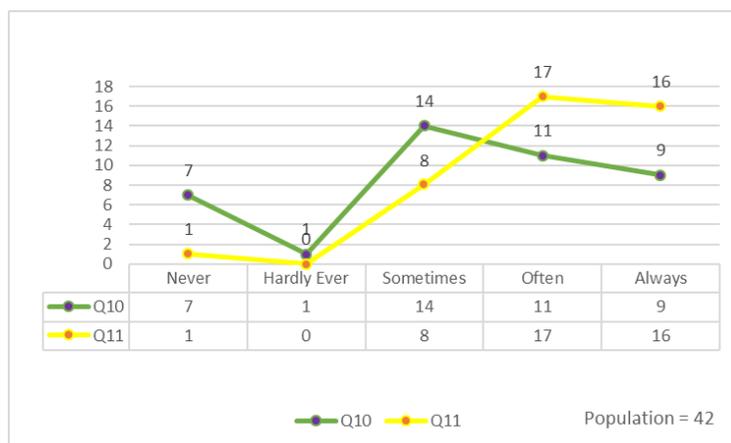


Figure 5. This chart shows the impact of the use of WhatsApp for promoting learners' interaction.

Figure 5. As it may be observed in the figure, the students' interaction improved by the introduction of WhatsApp in the course as a way of keeping the student-student and student-teacher interaction on. Despite the fact that the majority of students did not select the always option as their principal, the number of students who did not practice English before the implementation come down from 7 to 1, while the frequencies often and always rose respectively. This shows the clear improvement of the classroom interaction promoted by the use of this social network.

Conclusions

Based on the literature review, it was found that the bigger the field of technology gets, the more opportunities there will be for learners to be exposed to the target language. Indeed, it was addressed the fact that whilst WhatsApp may boost the language learning in and outside the classrooms, they might get trapped by social contents or exchange as

they are using the phone in the class -in classroom tasks-. Therefore, the eight principles by Elias (2011) plus five others by the researcher of this study were outlined for a better learning environment construction.

The statistical part of the study showed that learners have a positive perception – attitude-towards the use of WhatsApp for course purposes. Moreover, they indicated their willingness to suggest the app for every classroom. On the other hand, they also pointed out that they read posted messages whenever they had time.

Finally, the comparative analysis shown in figure 5 was aimed at comparing the frequency learners used to practice before and after the WhatsApp group implementation for course purposes, in and out of the classroom. The analysis clearly displayed the enhancement of interaction after its implementation. Nevertheless, due to the fact that technology rapidly changes, the present study must be subjected to further scientific considerations.

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