

WhatsApp as a Supporter Tool in Language Learning: A Study of Saudi EFL Learners' Perceptions

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Abstract

Technology has literally become inseparable from modern day living as it always stays with us in all places and times. Therefore, prudence demands that teachers too, make positive use of it for language learning/teaching. This study compares the impact of WhatsApp based learning activities (WBLA) with conventional activities on boosting the four language skills of Saudi EFL students. The study also investigates Saudi EFL students' perceptions on using WBLA as a tool of English language learning, motivation and autonomy. A close-ended questionnaire was developed to collect data from 100 Saudi EFL undergraduate students at Duba, University of Tabuk, the subjects of this study. The investigation showed that WBLA has a positive impact on shaping the Saudi EFL undergraduates' perceptions to language learning. Moreover, results indicate that male learners outperformed females in all the four skills. The study, therefore, concludes that WBLA should be integrated in all EFL classes. This study establishes that novel use of technology offers effective assistance in the language classroom.

Keywords: attitudes, English language learning, motivation, learning autonomy, English language teaching, MALL, WhatsApp

1. Introduction

Use of social media as a learning tool for EFL learners has become an essential and effective factor in language learning. It contributes to facilitating teaching and learning as technological devices play a vital role in the lives of young people, and they motivate students and teachers to change their traditional methods to cognitively attractive ways. Using technological devices may create a new educational environment that differs from the traditional one that focuses on the classroom and the teacher.

Many studies, especially in the pandemic and post pandemic times, have investigated the efficacy of WhatsApp as a tool in English language learning (e.g., Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Arifani, 2019; Çam & Can 2019; Damanik, 2020; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Nihayati & Indriani, 2021). Such studies explored the problem from various angles and perspectives in different contexts. However, its novelty in research has not waned because WhatsApp is only one of the tools that belong to the broad field which is called Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). What sets WhatsApp apart, though, is its ease of use and popularity among learners and non-learners alike. Such familiarity makes it possible for it to play a vital role in the field of English education and learning.

In the first place, MALL collaborates with and aids EFL instructors to discuss, interact, and build a healthy bonding with the students in the learning environment. Such MALL-based learning motivates learners to use language naturally inside the classroom. This is hoped to compensate for the artificiality of language practise in the EFL context (Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021; Al-Ahdal & Shariq, 2019).

In the Saudi context, integration of WhatsApp in the learning process and investigation of its effects has been widely studied in addition to extra-academic factors that affect learning, such as learning anxiety and motivation (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019), as a tool for language instruction (Alshammari et al., 2017), in vocabulary selection for developing the writing skills (Alsalem, 2013). However, what makes this study special is its broad focus on four variables, i.e., the four language skills, students' attitudes, motivation, and learner autonomy.

1.1 Research Objective

The present study aims to explore the impact of WhatsApp on Saudi EFL learners' language learning, motivation, anxiety and autonomous learning. The problems under are summarized in the following section as the research questions that guide the course of the investigation.

1. To what extent do WhatsApp have positive impact on Saudi EFL language learning?
2. What attitudes do EFL students have toward WhatsApp as a learning tool?
3. To what extent does WhatsApp have a positive impact on Saudi EFL learners' motivation?
4. To what extent does WhatsApp have a positive impact on developing Saudi EFL learners' autonomy?
5. Does WhatsApp have a significant impact of students as a language learning tool attributable to gender variable?

2. Literature Review

WhatsApp has strong effect in shaping the literature of language-learning. WhatsApp as an application of MALL along with computers, smartphones, and the internet is perceived as a tool that actively supports the teaching and learning process (Ta'amneh, 2017). However, not all teachers integrate technology in their language teaching. Lailiyah and Cahyono (2016) state that "some EFL teachers are reluctant to take the opportunity to integrate technology into their classrooms." (p. 345). The reason behind this tendency to lean on traditional teaching may be the less than desirable proficiency of teachers with technology as such and specifically as a professional tool.

2.1 Mobile Learning

Given the wide reach of smartphones in our daily lives, many studies explored the possibility of integrating such devices in the learning process (Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021; Calvo et al., 2014). A cursory look around us will prove that it is hard to find someone not holding a mobile phone. Chowdhury (2012) reported on the rapid expansion of Mobile phones since 1995. Alshabab and Almaqrn (2018) affirmed that the reach of mobiles has been so immense that it has even affected the teaching/learning styles. Mobile learning, however, is a broad term which includes the use of one or several of the applications like Twitter, Facebook, Email, SMS as tools for learning. Yet, these applications contribute in improving learning to some extent (Calvo et al., 2014). WhatsApp is one of the simpler applications in terms of installation and wide range of materials (such as audio, video text etc.) that can be shared on it. In addition, it can be used to share links, homework, teaching materials etc. Teachers can also ascertain that their students received such materials (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). Mobile learning in the Saudi context has also played a major role in the development of EFL learning and teaching (Fattah, 2015).

2.2 Impact of WhatsApp on Language Learning

The impact of WhatsApp on students' enhanced English language learning has been focused on in many studies (Ahmed, 2019; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Alsaleem, 2013; Arifani, 2019; Andujar, 2016; Asif, 2018; Çam & Can 2019; Damanik, 2020; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Maheshwari, 2020; Nihayati, & Indriani, 2021; Nasr & Mustafa, 2018). Maheshwari (2020) explored the impact of WhatsApp group on students' EFL learning. The study revealed that WhatsApp encourages student-student interaction, encourages collaborative learning and helps learners celebrate productivity. Ahmed (2019) found that WhatsApp positively impacted the development of reading and writing skills and provided students with various opportunities to develop their language skills. Likewise, Çam and Can, (2019) showed that using WhatsApp outside the classroom setting develops student efficacy in reading and listening skills. Students revealed their joyfulness, happiness and pride in applying WhatsApp in their language learning experience. Mahdi (2018) found signs of students' vocabulary development due to their using WhatsApp. To sum up, females were found to perform better than male learners in the Jordanian setting while using WhatsApp in their learning (Bataineh et al., 2018).

2.3 The Impact of WhatsApp on Students' Motivation, Anxiety and, Autonomy in Learning

The impact of WhatsApp on students' motivation in language learning/teaching have] been highlighted by many studies (Alamer, 2016; Alshammari et al., 2018; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Bensalem, 2018; Elyas & Rehman, 2018; Khan, 2016). Nunan (2015) established a positive correlation between being a good language learner and motivation. Khan (2016) showed that using WhatsApp motivated Pakistani students in the reading skills. Studies on anxiety, which is a psychological state of discomfort, have been numerous too in the context of WhatsApp in the classroom. Johnson (2004) affirmed that anxiety 'cause(s) learners' block' (p. 50). A number of studies have found that using WhatsApp decreases students' anxiety while learning a language (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Elyas & Rehman, 2018; Han & Keskin, 2016; Shamsi et al., 2019).

2.4 WhatsApp in the Saudi Context

WhatsApp takes the lion's share of our daily life given its huge popularity around the globe. The impact of WhatsApp has continued to grow notably in Saudi Arabia till it became one of the basic modes of communication (Alshammari et al., 2017). WhatsApp emerged, due to its impact, in many of the studies in Saudi Arabia (Ahmed & Hassan, 2019; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Almogheerah, 2021; Alqahtani et al. (2018; Çam & Can, 2019; Hamad, 2017; Nasr & Mustafa, 2018) as a technological aid worthy of research. Alqahtani et al. (2018) probed the attitudes of Saudi EFL students on WhatsApp as a learning platform. Students in the study perceived WhatsApp as an amazing teaching/learning platform that shaped their language learning. Hamad (2017) indicated that fresher students at King Khaled University reported their positive attitudes to the impact of WhatsApp in developing their vocabulary. Moreover, Alqasham (2018) explored the impact of WhatsApp in ensuring students' continued learning. This was assigned to the application of WhatsApp in informal language learning. Previous studies affirmed that WhatsApp impacts students' attitudes positively as a learning tool, this study is special in measuring the impact of WhatsApp on the four language skills and systems. In the same vein, previous results were conducted on one or two of the four independent variables taken up in this study. Therefore, the researcher tries to take all the four variables from one sample at the same time in this study which explores the impact of WhatsApp on Saudi EFL learners' language learning, motivation, anxiety and, autonomous learning.

3. Methodology

Research design

The study is quantitative in nature. A validated questionnaire with close-ended items was used to check students' perceptions on four variables. The study took place in the academic year 1440 AH at University of Tabuk.

3.1 Research Instruments

A questionnaire with 17 closed-ended items was the instrument used to gather data in this study. The questionnaire consisted of responses based on the 5-point Likert scale adapted from (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019). Response options were between 1 to 5 with perceptions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire items were divided into four groups: English skills, on which items from 1-6 were based, attitudes, 7-9; motivation, 10-12; learning autonomy, 13-17. The questionnaire was prepared in both English and Arabic and was administrated using Google Forms to English major students at the University College of Duba.

3.2 Participants

A convenience sample of 100 Saudi EFL students were the subjects of this study including both male and female students, (M=42, F = 58). All participants were enrolled in the Department of Languages and Translations at the University of Tabuk. Formal consent for participation was obtained from the respondents in this study. The age range of the group was between 20 and 24 years. All of them were in their second and final year at the university. Their language proficiency level ranged between intermediate and upper-intermediate.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The values of Cronbach's stability coefficients alpha, arithmetic averages and standard deviations of the domains, statistically significant differences between domains and gender demographic variables were extracted as shown in the table 1, 2, 3 below.

4. Data Analysis

Likert Scales were the alternatives of this study (Strongly Disagree =1 to strongly Agree = 5). The score above 3 was taken to reflect a positive attitude while the score below 3 was taken to indicate a negative attitude.

Table 1. Reliability of the questionnaire items

Domains	Items N.	Cronbach's alpha
English Language Learning	6	0.89
Attitude	3	0.75
Motivation	3	0.90
Anxiety and autonomy in learning English	5	0.88
Total score	17	0.92

Table 1 shows that the values of the stability coefficients computed to (0.92). The reliability of the variable ranged between (0.70 – 0.90). A test is reliable when Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 or higher. The overall Cronbach's alpha measured for all the items (P= 0.92). It is a high and suitable value for scientific research.

Gender

Table 2 shows that more than half of the participants (58%) are female while the male learners were (42%) of the participants.

Table 2. Descriptive statistic of gender variable (N=100)

Variable	Category	Percentage	Frequency
Gender	Female	58%	58
	Male	42%	42

4.1 Description of the Dependent Variables

Table 3 shows the participants' responses for the four variables under study. The students scored in the English language learning variable a high mean score (M=4.20, Std=0.71).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the variables

Variable	Item n	Range	Mean	SD
English Language Learning	6	3.96–4.41	4.20	0.71
Motivation	3	3.93–4.18	4.08	0.86
Anxiety and autonomy in learning English	5	2.84–4.49	3.77	0.71
Attitude	3	3.44–4.11	3.83	0.90
Overall	17	3.77–4.20	3.97	0.69

4.2 Findings

Arithmetic means and standard deviations will be used to show the students' exceptional score on each variable tested in this study. The following section answers each of the research questions.

RQ1: To what extent does WhatsApp have a positive impact on Saudi EFL learners' language learning?

Table 4 shows that the arithmetic averages of the language learning domain items were all in high degrees and ranged between (3.96-4.41). The general arithmetic mean was also at a high degree (4,20) with low standard deviation (0.71).

Table 4. The Impact of WhatsApp on students' skills

Language skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. WhatsApp helps me to improve my listening skill	4.18	.88
2. WhatsApp helps me improve my reading skills	4.41	.72
3. WhatsApp helps me improve my speaking skills	4.19	.86
4. WhatsApp helps me to develop my vocabulary	4.25	.72
5. WhatsApp helps me improve my writing skills	4.24	.97
6. WhatsApp helps me to enhance my English grammar	3.96	1.08
Total	4.20	.71

RQ2: What attitudes do EFL students have toward WhatsApp as a learning tool?

Table 5 shows that students achieved in this domain (M=3.83, Std=0.90). The results ranged from medium into high scores. Item 8 got a medium mean score of (M=3.44, Std=1.42), whereas the remaining items reflected a high degree from (3.94- 4.11). It can be reported that students showed a highly positive attitude towards using WhatsApp as a tool for learning.

Table 5. The impact of WhatsApp on Students' attitudes as tool for learning

Attitude	Means	Standard Deviation
7. WhatsApp is an active tool for learning English language learning	4.11	1.01
8. Learning via WhatsApp is simple	3.94	0.94
9. I like WhatsApp learning to classroom learning	3.44	1.42
Total	3.83	0.90

RQ3: To what extent does WhatsApp have a positive impact on Saudi EFL learners' motivation?

Table (6) shows that the arithmetic averages of the motivation domain items ranged between moderate and high degrees from (3.93 - 4.18), the general arithmetic mean was at a high degree (4,08) and the standard deviation low at (0.86). This signifies the high impact that WhatsApp has on students' motivation.

Table 6. The impact of WhatsApp on students' motivation

Motivation	Means	Standard Deviation
10. WhatsApp motivates me to learn English easily	4.13	0.86
11. I engage in WhatsApp group discussions actively	4.18	0.98
12. I prefer learning via WhatsApp	3.93	0.98
Total	4.08	0.86

RQ4: To what extent does WhatsApp have a positive impact on developing Saudi EFL learners' autonomy?

Table 7 shows that the arithmetic averages of the anxiety and learning autonomy domain items ranged between a moderate and high degree from (2.84 - 4.49), the general arithmetic mean was at a high degree (3,77) and the standard deviation low at (0.71) all of which are considered to be high impact.

Table 7. The Impact WhatsApp on maximizing students' learning autonomy

learning autonomy	Mean	Standard Deviation
13. WhatsApp helps me to chat with my teacher freely	4.49	0.73
14. I feel comfort while using WhatsApp as a learning tool	2.84	1.33
15. I feel free when I chat with my teacher via WhatsApp	4.47	0.71
16. WhatsApp in English learning increases students' learning independence	3.90	1.02
17. I don't hesitate to make mistakes during communication via a learning group	3.18	1.36
Total	3.77	0.71

RQ5: Does WhatsApp have a significant impact of students as a language learning tool attributable to gender variable?

T-tests presented in Table 8 show the overall means for both genders. Male learners scored (M=4.30, Std=.60) whereas females achieved (M=3.73, Std=.64) showing that males outperformed their female counterparts. The Sig value amounted 0.000** indicating that the differences between the scores of male and female learners are significant statistically. In the same vein, Table 8 shows that male learners outperformed females in all the study variables; all the differences between males and females in the dimensions were significant.

Table 8. T-test, to show the differences between males and females on the main study variables

dimension	category	N.	mean	Sta. dev.	df	T value	Sig.
Overall	Male	42	4.30	.60	99	4.463	0.000**
	Female	58	3.73	.64			
English Language Learning	Male	42	4.49	.61	99	3.679	0.000**
	Female	58	3.99	.71			
Attitude	Male	42	4.20	.84	99	3.763	0.000**
	Female	58	3.55	.85			
Motivation	Male	42	4.36	.71	99	2.895	0.005**
	Female	58	3.87	.91			
Autonomy in learning English	Male	42	4.14	.70	99	4.900	0.000**
	Female	58	3.50	.59			

** Significant at 0.05

5. Discussion

The study results indicate that WhatsApp has a positive effect on the four language skills of Saudi EFL learners. The respondents’ perception of WhatsApp in language learning was high at 4.20. This finding is in line with Ahmed, 2019; Alrabai, 2014; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Alghamdy, 2019). Alghamdy, (2019) showed that students in the experimental group who were taught the four language skills using WhatsApp outperformed the students who studied traditionally. Similarly, Ahmed (2019) reported the great impact of WhatsApp in boosting students’ performance in reading and writing skills.

Students in this study showed a high mean score of 3.83 on the use of WhatsApp as a tool for learning. La Hanisi et al. (2018) showed that students used WhatsApp in their formal learning which positively impacted their attitudes because of its ease of use and interest for the students. Bin-Hady and Al-Tamimi (2021) found that social media platforms positively impacted the perceptions of Yemeni EFL learners and can be used in informal learning settings.

Furthermore, WhatsApp is shown to have a positive impact on motivating students. Students reported a high level of motivation towards their language learning with (M=4.08).This finding is in line with Ali and Bin-Hady who reported in their study that WhatsApp motivated students to learn English better. Khan (2016) reported that WhatsApp motivated students to enhance their reading abilities. Hamad (2017) indicated that joiner students at King Khaled University reported having positive attitudinal impact towards WhatsApp in developing their vocabulary. Similarly, Alqasham (2018) explored the impact of WhatsApp in ensuring students’ continued learning.

The findings in this study show that students' autonomous learning positively enhanced by using WhatsApp. This finding echoes earlier findings: Shamsi et al. (2019) indicated that students who used WhatsApp felt encouraged to communicate with others. Alshammari et al. (2018) debated that WhatsApp enhanced autonomous learning, in such a case, teachers should act as facilitators.

Finally, the study showed that male learners scored higher than female learners in all the four investigated variables, though both genders perceived the role of WhatsApp in their language learning experience as being a positive one as it was a convenient means to communicate with others which led to not only the development of their language skills, but also heightened their motivation and autonomous learning. This finding contradicts Bataineh et al. (2018) who found that females performed better than male learners in the Jordanian setting on using WhatsApp in their learning. On the other hand, Bin-Hady et al. (2020) found that gender did not impact the use of WhatsApp by leaners in adopting learning strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study compared the impact of WhatsApp based learning activities (WBLA) with conventional activities on boosting the four language skills of Saudi EFL students. The study also investigated Saudi EFL students' perceptions on using WBLA as a tool of English language learning, motivation and autonomy. A close-ended questionnaire was developed to collect data from 100 Saudi EFL undergraduate students at Duba, University of Tabuk who were the subjects of this study. The investigation showed that WBLA has a positive impact on shaping the Saudi EFL undergraduates’ perceptions to language learning. Moreover, results indicated that male learners outperformed females in all the four skills. From the results of this study, it can be inferred that WhatsApp has various advantages in impacting students' language learning skills, motivation, and autonomy. These findings highlight the need of keeping our students and teachers well versed with what technology has to offer each and adapt and adopt the same. WhatsApp based activities for language learning have an important impact on reducing students' anxiety. Earlier studies have reported that WhatsApp enhances students’ dependence on themselves and in their becoming autonomous learners (Bataineh et al., (2018). Therefore, using WhatsApp groups in language learning helps much in achieving learning autonomy because a learner can communicate what he/she knows about the topic or the material through WhatsApp.

7. Recommendations

Adaptation is very much a part of being a teacher as a good teacher is, first, a good learner. WE know that the technology and the young generation are synonyms to each other and attempting to separate the two can have disastrous consequences. Indeed, the GenX learners outrightly reject teachers and learning environments that are divorced from technology. Hence, it is the need of the hour to encourage students to make use of all that technology offers as tools in their learning since this is what appeals to them the most. These findings are indictors that course designers in the Saudi universities should integrate WhatsApp as a learning tool or even as an assessment tool. As

facilitators, EFL teachers can guide their students to use WhatsApp to develop their English language skills.

8. Limitations

This study has added to the available literature on the use of messaging apps as educational tools in the EFL classroom. However, the researcher identifies the lack of qualitative data as its limitation. It is hoped that future replications will be sensitive to this shortcoming.

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Appendix 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the Individual Items (N=100)

English Language Learning	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. WhatsApp helps me to improve my listening skill	4.18	.88
2. WhatsApp helps me improve my speaking skills	4.19	.86
3. WhatsApp helps me improve my reading skills	4.41	.72
4. WhatsApp helps me improve my writing skills	4.24	.97
5. WhatsApp helps me to develop my vocabularies	4.25	.72
6. WhatsApp helps me to enhance my English grammar	3.96	1.08
Total	4.20	.71
Attitude	Means	Standard Deviation
7. WhatsApp is an active tool for learning English language learning	4.11	1.01
8. I like WhatsApp learning to classroom learning	3.44	1.42
9. Learning via WhatsApp is simple	3.94	0.94
Total	3.83	0.90
Motivation	Means	Standard Deviation
10. WhatsApp motivates me to learn English easily	4.13	0.86
11. I prefer learning via WhatsApp	3.93	0.98
12. I engage in WhatsApp group discussion actively	4.18	0.98
Total	4.08	0.86
Anxiety and learning autonomy	Mean	Standard Deviation
13. WhatsApp helps me to have a chat with my teacher freely	4.49	0.73
14. I feel free when I chat with my teacher via WhatsApp	4.47	0.71
15. I feel comfort while using WhatsApp as a learning tool	2.84	1.33
16. I don't hesitate making mistakes during communication via a learning group	3.18	1.36
17. WhatsApp in English learning increases students' learning independence	3.90	1.02
Total	3.77	0.71

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