

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE USE OF WHATSAPP IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic made people stay at home for months forcing educators to engage the use of WhatsApp and some other digital platforms in teaching. This investigation, therefore, was to find out the perception of students on the use of WhatsApp in learning English language in particular. The target subjects are the students of the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ). This study employed the survey design, observation, and structured interviews. Four structured interview questions were used for data collection. The sample for this study consists of twenty-five (25) respondents from the Nigerian Institute of Journalism in the Ifako-Ijaiye Area of Lagos State. This was done using Simple Random Sampling. The data collected was analyzed using a derived table. The results showed that the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language is highly effective. Many of the students are positively affected by the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language, although they still prefer physical learning (traditional face-to-face) since they are easily distracted whenever they learn using WhatsApp as the communication mode. The findings indicated that WhatsApp cannot easily pass all the needed information in the teaching and learning process. The study strongly recommends blended learning; the use of WhatsApp as well as traditional face-to-face teaching.

Keywords: Students' Perception, WhatsApp, Learning, English language, Traditional Face-to-Face.

Introduction

E-learning which has now become the order of the day was dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic which broke out in 2020. People were forced to stay at home which made all sectors of the economy stand still. This pandemic opened the eyes of educators to e-learning, whereby the teaching and learning process can still be ongoing in the comfort of one's home. According to Comerchero (2006), e-learning is a flexible term used to describe a means of teaching through technology. This kind of learning requires an internet connection and other technological devices.

There are many digital platforms that educators deploy for teaching their students, amongst them are Zoom, Microsoft Team, WhatsApp, Facebook, Google Docs, Digital video, Edmodo, and Online Corpora. All these e-learning platforms are also called mobile learning platforms (Wijaya, 2021). These mobile learning platforms enable the instructors to share information and communicate without physical presence. The information and communication technologies shared between online students through social interactions on mobile tools promote opportunities for online cooperation and collaboration (Barhoumi & Rossi, 2013). Mobile educational technologies provide online learners with opportunities to communicate and share knowledge (Nelson, Christopher, & Mims, 2009). It has been observed that e-learning keeps growing fast (Pappas, 2015). An increasing number of individuals, corporations, and institutions are turning to e-learning as they recognize its effectiveness and its convenience (Wijaya, 2021).

As highlighted above, there are many digital platforms for learning, but the focus of this study is WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a free mobile messaging application, massively used for messaging and voice calls (Pappas, 2015). WhatsApp was founded in 2009 by WhatsApp, Inc. The company name puns on the popular colloquial greeting '*What's up?*' And app, short for application (Emily, 2013). This app allows people to communicate on their smartphones across the world, making it a popular choice for people who love and travel abroad. It also works across major mobile device platforms, such as; Android and iOS. Notable WhatsApp features include; voice calling, group chats, end-to-end encryption, and status updates similar to Snapchat and Instagram Stories (Emily, 2013). The app functions by using cellular data or WIFI and the user's existing phone numbers. WhatsApp can then be said to be a communication media and social networking platform that allows instant communication of information between two individuals or a group of individuals. Crompton (2013) argues that from an educational perspective, much like businesses, the interconnectivity of social media can help researchers, educators, and learners collaborate more effectively while extending their communication methods among one another.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the perception of the students on the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language. It has been observed that the new normal has dictated the new way of teaching and learning, which is using digital platforms and tools (Mucundanyi and Hoodley, 2021; Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, and Suman, 2022; Moorhouse and Yan, 2023). WhatsApp is affordable and comes in handy hence the popular use of this social medium for teaching and learning. There is a need to investigate the perception of the learners via the use of this communication mode. How knowledgeable are the students in using digital tools for learning the English language? Are the students comfortable using these tools

for learning the English language? How effective are these tools for learning the English language? It is very important to ascertain the impact of WhatsApp on learning which could be positive or negative, therefore, this study opens up the impacts and dictates the way forward.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Activity Theory and Learning Theory.

The Activity theory originated in the former Soviet Union and is rooted in Vygotskian psychology. Vygotsky proposed that a child derives an understanding of the world through culturally-based social interactions. Accordingly, knowledge that is acquired by a child through social interactions represents transmitted cultural knowledge (Nardi,1995).

Activity theory according to Spasser,(1999) is a framework that researchers use to design and analyze interactions between members of a group and discover factors influencing their participation in online discussions mediated by computers or other devices. Activity theory is a suitable framework through which to design, understand, and improve learning through online learning communities (Tolman,1988).

Activity theory was used as a framework for the study to account for the systems that link the learning of the English language with WhatsApp. Based on the principles of activity theory, activity, and learning are interactive and interdependent (Jonassen 2002). This theory is based on the assumption that all human actions are mediated by tools and cannot be separated from the social milieu in which an action is carried out. Activity theory in this study provides the framework for describing the structure, development, and context for the activities that were supported through the use of WhatsApp instant messaging. Thus, within this study, the use of WhatsApp influences the learning of the English Language, the WhatsApp instant messaging tool was viewed as the mediating device for learning. The use of this mediating device was explored to see whether or not the tool influenced the learning of the English Language.

The essence of this theory is to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of learning and interaction within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic-driven shift to online education, specifically through platforms like WhatsApp. In other words, by employing activity theory as a theoretical framework, the study gains insights into the complex interplay between technologies, social interaction, and learning processes in the context of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers a holistic perspective that goes beyond individual behaviors to consider the broader socio-cultural dynamics shaping educational practices. Moreover, the study's recommendation for blended learning aligns with activity theory's emphasis on the integration of different tools and approaches to optimize learning outcomes.

Learning Theory

Another theoretical perspective of this study is also described about learning theories. Learning theory describes how students receive, process, and retain knowledge during learning. Cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences, as well as prior experience, all play a part in how understanding, or a worldview, is acquired or changed and knowledge and skills retained. (Siemens,2005)

Learning theories refer to the conceptual frameworks describing how information is absorbed, processed, and retained during learning. Conventionally, the teaching strategy learning process generally uses objectivism (instructor-centric). Objectivism involves learners passively receiving knowledge from an instructor. The instructor prepares learning materials in advance and learners study in class at the same time. An alternative to this is constructivism (learner-centric), which allows learners to control the pace of their learning and construct personal knowledge (**Bates, 2014**).

Founded by Jean Piaget, constructivism emphasizes the importance of the active involvement of learners in constructing knowledge for themselves. Students are taught to use background knowledge and concepts to assist them in their acquisition of novel information. On approaching such new information, the learner faces a loss of equilibrium with their previous understanding, and this demands a change in cognitive structure. This change effectively combines previous and novel information to form an improved cognitive schema. Constructivism can be both subjectively and contextually based. Under the theory of radical constructivism, coined by Ernst von Glasersfeld, understanding relies on one's subjective interpretation of experience as opposed to objective "reality" (**Clark, 2020**).

The essence of this theory is to ensure knowledge is actively constructed by an individual, and social interactions with others are also influential in the constructive process. Constructivist learning activities are needed to encourage the effective use of portable devices in a mobile learning environment.

Literature Review

WhatsApp Instant Messaging (WIM)

According to Barhoumi (2015), the story of WhatsApp is an archetypical success story. He further explains that the app was created by Brian Anton and Jan Koom, both Yahoo employees. Supported by an 8-million-dollar investment by Major Sequoia, one of Silicon Valley's most fashionable investors' holding companies, the pair launched WhatsApp in 2009 and have been very successful (Barhoumi,2015). Nowadays, collaboration is key and necessary in the learning environment. WhatsApp makes collaborative learning efficient and effective. It builds a relationship that stimulates learners for consistent and progressive learning. The WhatsApp platform has the following collaborative features (WhatsApp, 2010).

- Provide online students with the ability to exchange text messages, images, videos, and voice notes to their social network or group and contacts.
- Provide students or instructors with the ability to create a group (social network group) that supports the social interactions of up to 11 group members. Members can engage in discussion forums.
- WhatsApp Messenger provides the ability for students to send messages without limits. The application uses a 3G/EDGE Internet data plan or Wi-Fi to ensure continuous data transmissions across the WhatsApp mobile system.
- Students using WhatsApp through a variety of mobile devices, such as smartphones, Galaxy tablets, and so on can message one another through texts, images, videos, and so on.

In the same vein, Barhoumi (2015) posits the general benefits of using WhatsApp instant messaging in the blended mobile lecture as follows:

- WhatsApp instant messaging facilitates online collaboration and cooperation between online students connected from school or home in a blended mobile lecture.
- WhatsApp is a free application that is easy to use.
- Groups connected to WhatsApp instant messaging can share learning objects easily through comments, texting, and messaging. Discussions are related to the course content taught 100% in class.
- WhatsApp provides students with the ability to create a class publication and thereby publish their work in the group
- Information and knowledge are easily constructed and shared through WhatsApp instant messaging.

Furthermore, Akakpo (n.d), itemizes the features and benefits of WhatsApp as follows:

- Texts

WhatsApp provides a simple, reliable messaging feature to send a text to friends and family, since WhatsApp uses your phone's Internet connection, to send messages so you can avoid SMS fees.

- WhatsApp Voice and Video Calls

The voice and video call feature allows you to talk with friends and family, even if they are in another country while video calls allow you to make face-to-face conversations. WhatsApp voice and video calls use your phone's Internet connection, instead of your cell plan's voice minutes, so you do not have to worry about expensive calling charges.

- Photos and Videos

This feature allows you to send photos and videos on WhatsApp instantly. You are also able to capture photos and video with a built-in camera and you can share photos and videos quickly even if you are on a slow connection.

- Group Chat

Group chat and interactive interaction is a feature that keeps groups of people in touch, like your family or co-workers. With group chats, you can share messages, photos, and videos with up to 256 people at once. You can also name your group, mute, or customize notifications, and more.

- WhatsApp on the web and desktop

WhatsApp on the web and desktop feature can seamlessly synchronize all your chats to your computer so that you can chat on whatever device is most convenient.

- End-To-End Encryption

For security, WhatsApp has built-in security by default, which ensures your personal information shared on WhatsApp is secured. End-to-end encryption ensures your messages and calls are secured so only you and the person you are communicating with can read or listen to them, and nobody in between, not even WhatsApp.

- Voice Messages

Another feature is voice messaging, you can record voice messages and share them at any time.

In her opinion, Khanna (2015) asserts that WhatsApp offers a cost-effective, user-friendly, and hassle-free solution over the conventional practice of SMS (Short Message Service). WhatsApp is economically handy and sustainable for both the learners and the teachers. With the use of WhatsApp for teaching and learning, other life activities can be combined to suit the needs and preferences of the learners. Alfaki (2014) states that WhatsApp has positively influenced learners' ability to participate and engage with peers online at any time. Furthermore, Church and De Oliveira (2013) list the following as key reasons for the use of WhatsApp by learners, the low cost of the application, sending of an unlimited number of messages, immediacy, the desire to feel a part of the trend since their acquaintances have already adopted the application, the capacity to conduct an on-going conversation with many friends simultaneously, the knitting together of a community of friends or family, and a sense of privacy relative to other social networks. In the same vein, Yeboah & Ewur (2014) posit that WhatsApp encourages learners to learn by anticipation of needs, makes collaborative learning efficient and effective, and builds a relationship that stimulates learner-to-learner for consistent and progressive learning.

Similarly, Willemse (2015) agrees with the use of WhatsApp groups and mentions that students have an opportunity for clarification on issues they did not understand

and students appreciate the presence of their educators in the group because they can provide them with guidance.

In a study by Bere (2013), an examination of the use of WhatsApp in a South African university class registered positive feedback from learners who claimed that it was an easier way to communicate with their teachers and the rest of the class, that it had a productive and fruitful discourse on relevant issues in an informal environment where learners learned intimately and authentically.

Are we able to record the same feedback with this South African University? The purpose of the study, therefore, is to examine the perception of the students who are receiving their learning through this mobile platform. How effective do these students perceive this mobile learning? This study, therefore, presents students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach such as structured interviews and observation. This research is to examine the perception of students on the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language. The population of this study comprised all the students of the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ) in Ifako- Ijaiye Local Government in Lagos State. The study made use of twenty- five (25) Ordinary Diploma (ND II) students who were randomly selected from this population. The research instrument which is a 'Structured Interview' was duly validated for face and content validity by experts in the field of English Language and Measurement and Evaluation.

Results

Twenty-five (25) students were interviewed on their knowledge of what WhatsApp is.

The following are the responses from the selected learners:

Seven (7) of the learners see it as a platform for sending messages, three (3) see it as a platform to enhance one's business, five (5) define it as an avenue for different people to connect, nine (9) see it as a platform for interaction with friends and family members, a learner sees it as a platform for calling your loved ones.

With the above responses, it could be deduced that the perceptions of students on WhatsApp are, varied. It is these meanings that will guide their perception of the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language.

Furthermore, they were asked how effective the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language is. The following are the responses from the twenty-five selected learners:

Table I: Derived Perceptions of the learners on the effectiveness of the use of WhatsApp in learning English language

Perception	Evidence For the Perception
Fairly effective- Worthwhile	It allows for clarification and self-expression.
Highly effective- Efficient	It gives an instant response
Effective – Collaborative	It allows collaboration with my peers and clarifies issues not cleared while teaching is ongoing.
Just Effective= Economical	It is economical

Ten (10) learners said the use of WhatsApp is fairly effective as it allows for clarifications and self-expression without fear or intimidation since no physical contact is allowed; they are of the view that this communication has made life easier for them as they can share their learning issues freely with their lecturers and peers. This is in line with Bere (2013), who submits that WhatsApp creates a relaxed atmosphere for sharing knowledge and experiences making learning enjoyable.

Five (5) learners thought that WhatsApp is highly effective as it gives them instant responses from their lecturers or peers, hence, no time wastage or waiting endlessly for a response that may not come, this is in agreement with the opinions of Church and De Oliveria (2013) who suggest that WhatsApp should be used for its immediacy advantage among other advantages it has.

Similarly, other sets of five (5) students said while the teaching is going on, they can freely chat with their peers to ask questions on the same topic being taught, they said it helps them in getting clarifications from their peers at a minimal cost. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) also equally note the collaborative function of WhatsApp learning and suggest that wherever possible it should be utilized. The remaining five (5) learners said it is just as effective as the use of WhatsApp in learning English language is quite economical.

The twenty-five (25) students were also asked if they had been positively affected by this digital tool. Many of them thought that they were and still are positively affected as they specifically mentioned the fact that it enhances learning during the 2020 lockdown and is now complementing their physical learning. A few of the learners said they are not positively affected as they are yet to come to terms with online learning as they do not understand it and are not easily able to follow through since they easily get distracted during online learning. This resonates with the views of Alfaki (2014), who notes that for technology to fully yield its advantages to the learners, there should be some control measures applied to its use to minimize the level of distractions.

When asked whether WhatsApp could pass all the needed information in the teaching and learning process, many of these learners complained that

WhatsApp may not be able to pass all the needed information because of network issues, they thought that some lecturers are not explicit enough about them to grasp the topic being taught. A few of the students agreed that WhatsApp passes all the needed information as they can download all the assignments and submit the same through WhatsApp. Many of the selected learners still prefer physical learning to online learning when they are asked to choose between the two learning modes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researcher concludes that the learners think that the use of WhatsApp in learning has come to stay and this should be encouraged among the learners so that the advantages can be maximized. They emphasized communication among themselves and between them and their lecturers; creating meaningful dialogue thereby encouraging sharing among learners and lecturers and as a learning platform. Many of the students are positively affected by the use of WhatsApp in learning the English language, although they still prefer physical learning (traditional face-to-face). Since the findings indicated that WhatsApp cannot easily pass all the needed information in the teaching and learning process, a blended approach involving the use of WhatsApp, as well as traditional face-to-face teaching, is therefore recommended. In a blended lecture, anything posted by the students or lecturers will be instantly accessible for online students working from home or school.

From the result of this study and available literature such as Barhoumi (2015); the following are the benefits of blended learning:

- Students can easily discuss different topics related to the course taught face-to-face.
- Students can continue their collaborative learning after the face-to-face teaching.
- Students and lecturers can share information taught face-to-face in an online class.
- Students will have the opportunity to read up on topics taught face-to-face which could be discussed with the lecturer in an online class.

The result of this study therefore confirms the findings of Williams, Birch, and Hancock (2012) that online lectures are more effective when combined with physical lectures.

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