LEARNERS’ PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF WHATSAPP IN ESL CLASSROOM

*ZARINA ASHIKIN ZAKARIA, NORHANA ABDULLAH, NORMAZLA AHMAD MAHIR & HAZLINA ABDULLAH
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
*zarina@usim.edu.my

Abstract: Technological advancement has given benefits to many aspects of our life, including education. The use of technology is nothing new in ESL classroom as many studies have been conducted to show how technology has been a great help in assisting the process of teaching and learning. WhatsApp application has become popular as a mobile learning style and regards as one of the communication platforms as many learners nowadays own smartphone. WhatsApp is a smartphone application for instant messaging. WhatsApp can be one of the inventive teaching techniques to attract learners and provide fun based learning. This study aimed to identify the learners’ perceptions on the use of WhatsApp in ESL classroom and the usefulness of WhatsApp in language learning. A group of 23 tertiary level learners were involved in this study. Throughout this course WhatsApp is used as a medium of interaction between the learners and the instructor. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and later transcribed and analysed qualitatively. The findings of the study suggested that the use of WhatsApp is helpful in learners’ learning the language better and enhance their proficiency in using English language. It implies that the use of WhatsApp should be encouraged to tertiary level learners and the institutions should provide good internet facilities.

Keywords: learners’ perceptions, ESL Classroom, WhatsApp.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is difficult to engage learners’ interest in learning English these days. Hence the teaching of English has to be inventive in order to be at par with the learners’ interest. Since most of the learners nowadays have their own smartphones, WhatsApp application is used as a learning tool in learning English. WhatsApp is an application which has become popular as a mobile learning style and regards as one of the communication platforms among the learners.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the learners’ attitudes towards WhatsApp application.
2. To identify the perceptions of the learners on the usefulness of WhatsApp in their learning process.

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted in which 10 learners participated. The data were later transcribed and analyzed according to themes using Atlas ti software.
INTRODUCTION

Technology has given us benefits in many ways including in the education aspect. One of the kind of technology used in classroom is the WhatsApp application. This application has become popular as a learning tool in many institutions. A study conducted by Telenor Research (2016), there are numerous number of other instant messaging applications such as WeChat, LINE, Viber and Telegram, however, 97% of Malaysians are using WhatsApp. Even the use of short messaging system (SMS) has declined tremendously and WhatsApp takes over. Hence, WhatsApp is popular compared to other applications. In addition, most of the students nowadays are exposed to this application and used it often for communication purpose. This, has arouse the interest of the researcher to conduct this study and practice the use of WhatsApp application in English classroom due to its wide usage among the learners, in their daily life.

WhatsApp is a smartphone application for instant messaging. It provides faster and easier communication among learners and develops ideas sharing too, for example, in a WhatsApp group. WhatsApp group is a platform in which it consists of all members like instructors and students. All students from the class can have their discussion on selected topics via this application as it provides instant response within the group members to join the conversation and this makes effective communication. In addition, it is one of the innovative teaching techniques which is used to grasp learners’ interest, attention and promotes fun learning environment. It also allows learners to express thoughts and ideas via many features of the application such as photo attachment, video sharing, web links sharing, video and audio recording and many more. It also encourages learners to participate actively in learning activities via many features of WhatsApp application. Hence, this study is aimed to identify the learners’ perceptions on the use of WhatsApp in ESL classroom and the usefulness of WhatsApp in language learning.

This paper will examine the background of this study, some related literature reviews and the methodology used in conducting this study. More specifically, the data were collected through various aspects – the learners’ attitudes towards the application, how they perceive the usefulness of the WhatsApp application in the language learning process and their behavior towards the use of this application in teaching and learning. This study will also provide some implications and recommendations to practitioners such as learners, instructors and the Ministry of Education. It is hoped that this study will provide an overview of this WhatsApp application to the readers.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

WhatsApp application is seen as an important platform for communication between instructor-learner and learner-learner and also as a learning tool in ESL classroom. Most Malaysian learners are more prone to use their mother tongue rather than the English language in English class. Therefore, WhatsApp is used in this study in order to see learners’ feedback towards this application which was used in English class and to know whether this application could show any significance to their perception or not.

All undergraduates need to obtain a certain level of MUET band for certain courses as a requirement of the universities. Learners need to achieve at least band three for the MUET test which includes the four language skills (speaking, reading, listening, writing) and it is the university’s main aspiration to produce graduates who are competent in language and professional skills in order to be parallel with other established institutions and to meet the challenges of globalisation. However, many of the them are still weak in the language skills, for instance speaking fluency. Speaking is one of the skills that is considered difficult by the learners.

Some learners refused to speak English language in the class due to having lack of ideas and confidence in themselves and this can make them feel embarrassed. Some of them might have a lot of ideas about a certain topic discussed but unfortunately, they have difficulties in explaining and expressing them verbally. On the other hand, there are learners who are well
versed but have problems in giving points and ideas. Thus, this is where the instructor can use WhatsApp as a medium of transferring and sharing information, ideas, pictures and many more for them to explore. The situations occur in which the learners and instructor are having regular conversation. Learners could deliver their responses freely and the instructor responds to learners’ inquiries and comments, starts new issues, or posts queries (Dunlap, 2006). Learners can access all the information given easily and generate ideas from the topic given. The instructor here acts as an evaluator who helps in correcting and commenting on the learners’ responses. Apart from that, learners do not need to feel shy in expressing their thoughts via WhatsApp as they could attach any info graphics or links related to the topic because they could deliver their understanding of the topic discussed through the attachments given. This is to encourage the learners to do their reading and generate ideas by exploring the knowledge available online. They become more active in sharing attachments, hence, internal confidence in them could be gradually increased in real speaking activity lesson since they have a lot of ideas to voice out and share like what they did in the WhatsApp platform.

The focus here is on the learners’ perception on the use of WhatsApp therefore it relates to the issue of learners’ learning strategies that has long been debated in the teaching field. Most of the time language instructors have been blamed for the learners’ weakness in language learning especially English. Kolb (1984) discovered different perspectives on learners’ state and achievements in learning by inventing the four learning styles which include assimilating (watching and thinking), diverging (feeling and watching), accommodating (doing and feeling) and converging (doing and thinking). These could help the learners to learn better. Kolb’s (1984), Blackmore’s (1996) and Kavaliauskiene’s (2003) works become the reference for the study. Their studies focus on learning styles and preferences, therefore instructors can design, modify and improve their way of teaching and facilitate learners in learning.

Besides, as Johnsons (2014) mentioned that since WhatsApp is apparently a new phenomenon, only a few researches could be found about the WhatsApp usage as a communication platform between learners and instructor (Church & Oliviera, 2013). However, positive feedback was encountered from the South African university students who were satisfied with this application due to its easy engagement with others in the school community where communication occurred in an informal and also fun way (Bere, 2013). However, there are no studies being conducted that focus on the students’ perceptions towards the use of WhatsApp application in the Malaysian context which consequently result in the invisible use of the technique in Malaysian ESL classroom. This gap leads the researcher to conduct a study on the learners’ perception on the use of WhatsApp in ESL classroom.

Hence, by having this study, it could hopefully fill the gap on the absence of WhatsApp application in Malaysian ESL classroom. The findings could be new learning discoveries which would provide some beneficial insights on how the WhatsApp application, could be useful in helping Malaysian ESL learners to improve their learning based on the learners’ perspectives. Besides, the objectives for this study are:

1. To identify the learners’ attitudes towards WhatsApp application.
2. To identify the perceptions of the learners on the usefulness of WhatsApp application in their learning process.

Below are the research questions:

1. What are the learners’ attitudes towards WhatsApp application?
2. How is WhatsApp application useful in the learners’ learning process?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The existence of WhatsApp and its usage**

WhatsApp is a popular smartphone application that works on various devices and gadgets. WhatsApp application was invented in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton (Albergotti, MacMillan & Rusli, Evelyn, 2014) who formerly had invented Yahoo (Eric, 2012). It has been
available on the market since 2010 and is developed mainly for the purpose of replacing the existing SMS platform by giving a free of charge service. WhatsApp provides various functions, for instance text messages, audio files, attached images, link to any websites and video files which can be shared to individuals and groups. This new phenomenon is parallel with Vygotsky Constructivist Learning Theory which matches the use of WhatsApp. It aims to develop the learners’ social interaction as well as to raise and share information (Vygotsky, 1978). The learning resources can be accessed anytime, anywhere and in any features and it helps in developing the student’s learning performance. Hence, this application has become very popular in the last few years in which it had gained over 350 million users (Cohavi, 2013).

WhatsApp is rated as a great societal link that connects individuals to get and share the huge worldwide information quickly. It is also as part of the social media growth. According to Nicholson, (2011) whenever humans are sharing stories and influencing others, it is viewed as social networking. Vygotsky (1978) explained that “learning can also be influenced by numerous variables, including the cognitive and psychological state of the learner, teacher professionalism and nature and complexity of the pedagogical approach”. Overall, the effectiveness of learning and teaching can be improved through social interaction and this profits the learners in sharing information which is in line with the social development literature (Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition, the uncomplicated operation of WhatsApp service makes it available to all ages and backgrounds. By having a smartphone, subscribing to the internet data plan and installing the application, it is ready to be used. It allows the user to create WhatsApp groups among the teacher and learners by separating each group accordingly.

The importance of using WhatsApp in today’s classrooms.

WhatsApp is a smartphone’s application that is popular communication platform in the 21st century learning. It delivers real-time messages and faster knowledge resources. It can be used with Internet access. Internet has been widely used and most higher institutions provide free wifi to encourage mobile learning in campus. Hence knowledge can be found everywhere at anytime and this create the possibility of learning at any time and any place.

By using the mobile tools in learning, it is also known as an informal kind of learning where it provides a relaxing and handy online activity to the students. Thus, the usage of the smartphone and WhatsApp have widely spread. Many studies have proven that WhatsApp has been widely used by individuals due to its accessibility and ease of use in communication purposes.

Many studies portrayed the positive effects of the WhatsApp application in education such as it included effective information-sharing and ease of communications. Lenhart (2007) stated that WhatsApp and emails are creating the ease of information sharing among students where every thought and feeling are translated into words. They tend to write more and it is supported by other educators where they could see the impact of this new phenomenon could teach the students about language evolution. Similar finding was encountered by Devi & Tevera (2014) who said that Facebook and WhatsApp were also found as common application used for information sharing and academic communication among the university students. Overall, responding through WhatsApp was viewed as thriving because it helped to develop the students’ voice. The use of technologies like smartphones has gradually changed the traditional way of communication like handwriting (Ardilla, 2004).

WhatsApp enhances students’ learning performance

Besides providing many benefits to the students, WhatsApp also allows enhancement to the students’ learning performance by promoting an active learning involvement in WhatsApp conversation or discussion. Through this application, the learning process will be student-centered.

Solomon and Schrum (2007) claimed that WhatsApp provides a conversation platform to everyone that allows the existence of a relationship among them. It promotes information and knowledge sharing unconsciously. This is supported by Patient (2013) who stated that the
conversations between and among students using WhatsApp (smartphone application) demonstrates the sharing of academic information. Mar (2013) also emphasized that via WhatsApp, majority of the students were highly satisfied and agreed with this application. This not only could increase their willingness to read in English but also it gave positive impacts on their reading habits, hence resulting in more regularity and confidence. These studies showed that WhatsApp could help a lot in enhancing students’ learning performance especially in English subject.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Generally, this study is aimed to identify the learners’ attitudes towards WhatsApp application. Besides, it also identifies the perceptions of the learners on the usefulness of WhatsApp in their learning process and the learners’ behaviors towards the use of WhatsApp in teaching and learning. Moreover, the study is supported by some relevant and related literature reviews about WhatsApp and its perceptions. Therefore, this section described the methodology used for completing this study.

This research is using a descriptive quantitative kind of research approach because quantitative research provides a systematic empirical investigation of the research area. To gain some insight into the study, this research approach is useful to increase the understanding of the variable in order to evaluate its relevancy towards the research problem. Thus, this approach is more applicable as compared to a qualitative research.

In terms of data collection, it was collected through group focusinterviews. The participants were a group of 23 tertiary level students. The reason I chose this method was because it enables the participants to express their opinions and thoughts without worrying about what others would say. The questions probed were able to explore and extract as much information needed from the participants.

The participants of this study were doing their first year degree programme. One of the compulsory courses that they have to take was English for Communicative Purposes. In the syllabus, one of the areas to be covered was paraphrasing. Practices were usually given after sufficient input was given in the classroom. Hence, some practices were done via WhatsApp instead of the conventional pen and paper way. The selection of the participants of the study was purposive sampling as it fitted the research objectives. The finding of this study would be able to provide some ideas on the significance of using WhatsApp as an alternative way to language learning and teaching.

Overall, all the information collected was being analysed and summarised accordingly. This is to draw the conclusion based on the research findings.

FINDINGS

The findings focussed on the learners’ perception on the use of WhatsApp in ESL classroom. The data were collected through various aspects. They are the attitude towards WhatsApp, how they perceive the application and its convenience/ease of use and the usefulness of WhatsApp and their behaviour towards the use of WhatsApp application in teaching and learning.

Analysis of the research findings

The analysis of the research findings is explained based on the research questions which have been mentioned earlier. The explicit analysis clarifications are showed as follow.

The attitudes towards WhatsApp application.
First Research Question: What are the learners’ attitudes towards WhatsApp application?

In the interview, questions were asked to get the learners’ responses on their attitudes towards WhatsApp application. Positive responses were received. Based on the responses, the learners like to use WhatsApp application due to several reasons.

WhatsApp application makes communication easy. People from all over the world can communicate by just a click. Furthermore, most people nowadays has WhatsApp application installed in their smartphones which eases communication among them.

Besides, WhatsApp application charge is cheaper than SMS or phone calls. Once a smartphone has an internet and WhatsApp application is installed, communication can begin. It can be used as long as internet is accessible whether using data or wifi. Unlike SMS and phone calls, where they are charged respectively based on their usage per message or per minute.

In addition, WhatsApp application is favourable by the learners because it is accessible anytime and anywhere. For example a task is given by their lecturer via WhatsApp application, they can access to the task anytime even during odd hour and anywhere even they are not in class or campus. Hence, this makes learning easy for them.

Another reason is that WhatsApp application enables photo sharing, file sharing, location sharing and video call. These features ease their matters including the learning process. Retrieving information is just a click away, it seems.

Based on the responses, it can be concluded that WhatsApp application is favourable by the learners and it provides many advantages in many ways.

Second Research Question: How is WhatsApp application useful in the learners’ learning process?

It has been agreed that all the respondents said that WhatsApp application is useful in their learning process. The responses received from the interviews showed that using WhatsApp application seems to be new but useful in their learning process.

Many of the respondents responded that using WhatsApp application in their learning promotes mobile learning where learning can take place anywhere and anytime. Learning does not take place only in classrooms but also anywhere. It is an on-going process for them. Since it is accessible anytime and anywhere, they can communicate with each other in the group to do the tasks given by the lecturer. Open discussion among themselves enhances their communication skills too.

Besides that, by using WhatsApp application in learning, they can get immediate responses and information. Unlike the conventional learning setting, learners can only ask questions only in class when they see the lecturer. By using WhatsApp application, they can ask questions, share information anytime because everyone in the group is accessible and willing to respond to questions asked. This makes learning more fun and enjoyable.

WhatsApp application also encourages communication among the group members. Groups can be created and all group members are put in one group. When tasks are given by the lecturers, the respondents can discuss, in fact all the group members can participate. This is unlikely to happen in conventional teaching where learners either discuss with their partner or in groups of four. But by using WhatsApp application, all of them can share their opinion or thoughts or even argue with one another. Group discussion is important as it enables the learners to improve their speaking skill. But by using WhatsApp application, all of them can share their opinion or thoughts or even argue with one another. This also helps in boosting the level of confidence in using the language.

WhatsApp application is also useful in their learning process as it has special features that are photo and file sharing, location sharing and audio. These features makes learning handy in which learners can download handouts and exercises given by the lecturer, they can share their score of the exercises given by sending photos and many others. They do not have to carry the materials anywhere they go as all the materials are saved in their smart phones and can be accessed anytime. This is also easy for future reference.
WhatsApp application is also very useful for visual learners. Visual learners learn better by seeing or reading the materials. Hence, from the materials uploaded by the lecturers, this kind of learner can make the best of it in their learning process.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The description of the findings discussion will be described in detail as follows.

**The attitude towards WhatsApp application**

The results showed that this group of learners has positive attitudes towards the use of WhatsApp application. They were positive because it was easy to use, easy to learn, a quick sharing knowledge and helped in discussing the information easily. The results of this study support the statement made by Norfaezah (2015) who stated that the use of WhatsApp can help the students to share many things with the lecturer. Besides allowing a two-way communication in a very short time. The easy use of WhatsApp application like uploading videos related to language and voice recordings also provides an explanation of the topics to be taught more clearly than what is written. Furthermore, some learners actively share reading materials for discussion between them through online services over the face-to-face process.

**The usefulness of WhatsApp Application**

The results showed that most learners reported that WhatsApp application is very useful. The usefulness of this application could improve learners’ confidence in using the language, active in the language activities and help them to learn the language better. WhatsApp also helps the learners especially at the university in order to deliver and receive any information quickly and effectively. With excellent wifi connection at the university area, makes this process easier and faster. This is supported by a research conducted by Ida Sanjaya (2012) who found that majority of users are interested in using WhatsApp application because this application provides many attractive facilities such as sharing information in the form of audios, videos, images, or even sharing location of the user’s place. Countless things can be done using this application.

**IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since the findings showed that learners have positive attitude towards the use of WhatsApp in language learning, hence its usage should be encouraged in order to increase the cooperation among the learners through WhatsApp discussions. Besides, it is also a useful teaching tool to the lecturers in order to deliver any information to their students. It can be sent very quickly and effectively. For that reason, universities should provide internet facilities as a top priority in today’s education to enable broad use of WhatsApp. In addition, the results also showed the usefulness of the WhatsApp application among the students. As a result, the Ministry of Education should put efforts to improve and maintain the use of WhatsApp among the students.

For the research recommendation, further study may add a few aspects such as skills, knowledge and problems faced by the students in using WhatsApp application to get more in-depth understanding about its usefulness among the students. Other than that, in the future one could highly consider the size number of participants. In this research, as mentioned earlier, although the size number of participants might be slightly small which is 23, the researchers believe this size is sufficient and appropriate for a small qualitative study in providing the data which one intended to; however, a large scale research with bigger number of participants might be a great idea to be conducted in the future.
CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded with two major findings of the use of WhatsApp in language learning. Firstly, WhatsApp is significant as a useful tool in language learning among the learners and secondly, it increases learners engagement in learning through WhatsApp discussions. This research was successfully conducted to determine the learners’ attitudes on WhatsApp and its usefulness. The study provides implications for learners, lecturers and the Ministry of Education too. Suggestions for advanced study also have been recommended to further studies related to the use of WhatsApp among tertiary level learners. In conclusion, the use of WhatsApp in learning the language in the classroom would really beneficial to the learners and also to be implemented in today’s education as it could be able to make the learning more effective.
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