

Utilizing Mobile Technology: WhatsApp Group Chats as a Tool to Enhance Students' Engagement in ESP Learning

Nindyah Pratiwi^{1✉}, Anita Wijayanti²

(1) Management, STIB Kumala Nusa, Indonesia

(2) Entrepreneurship, Mahakarya Asia University, Indonesia

✉ Corresponding author
[nindyahpratiwi13@gmail.com]

Abstract

In line with the development of globalization, English is increasingly in demand, especially among students. This is because English is a fundamental competency with an international scope. In order to improve their skills, students need more time to study, and since the onset of Covid-19, online learning through WhatsApp has become a trend. This application allows teaching and learning to not only become easier but also encourages greater participation from students, helping them achieve their learning goals. This study found that students have a positive perception of using WhatsApp groups for ESP discussion learning. This research contributes valuable empirical evidence, providing continuous support for the collaboration of ESP courses via WhatsApp. However, this study has limitations, including a small sample size and general findings, indicating the need for further research to explore its long-term impact and the more specific implementation of technology-based learning.

Keywords: *WhatsApp group, English for Specific Purpose, Students' engagement*

INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of the world economy and expanding contacts among countries, the role of English becomes increasingly important since it is now widely understood, not only as an international language, but also as a prerequisite for finding a job. In this regard English for specific purposes (ESP) becomes pertinent in ensuring students' preparation for their future work in business, engineering, and health facilities. Yet, limited communicative approaches in the classroom, poor motivation, and inadequate opportunities for practice often serve as barriers (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). To cope with these challenges, creative solutions in tune with students' usage of technologies are required.

Mobile technologies are finding their way into classrooms in Indonesia. Of all the available options, WhatsApp is the best option because students are using it in great numbers, it is easy to use and a good number of people within a group can access it. Therefore, WhatsApp context has the capability to transform and complement conventional education as it provides an easy platform for group onsite and offsite engagement. (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). Given such an explosive potential, WhatsApp seems to be useful in the esp context that values language practice in order to make things work.

Research has indicated a promising potential of WhatsApp in improving the learning engagement. According to Andujar (2016), WhatsApp increases informal communication which then augments the students' confidence and willingness to engage in discussions. As noted by Barhoumi (2015), it even helps them by giving feedback and work together on a constant basis. In the Indonesian context, WhatsApp's ubiquity on almost every students device makes it a viable aid for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). In addition, students can use its multimedia features to augment the range of materials used in class and sharpen their learning experiences (Gon & Rawekar, 2017).

Moving on, to WhatsApp group chats which are based on a particular constructive learning theory that hierarchically or socially building a knowledge by which Vygotsky 1978 advocates the incorporation of finished teamwork exercises or socialization dimension in the construction of knowledge, discussions, sharing of opinions as well as the practicing of the language where children's

language skills have expanded. For teachers, WhatsApp is a knowledgeable tool for materials distribution, leading discussions and provision of feedback helping to increase the students' interest and participation (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010; Wut & Xu, 2021).

This study seeks to investigate as to how student participation in ESP courses in Indonesia is enhanced by the use of WhatsApp group chats. It focuses on the students' perception and measures the level of effectiveness of this medium in inducing participation in active learning with a view of strengthening the available research on the MALL while offering practical suggestions for contemporary ESP teaching.

METHOD

The first tool that was used in the study is a questionnaire that sought to investigate the students' perception toward the use of WhatsApp group chat as a means of promoting engagement in learning English for specific purposes. The Likert scale was also put in use in the same context where the questionnaire measured items using a scale of four, with reference to Mistar & Embi (2016) and Palupi et al. (2023). The items included soliciting students' engagement in learning and their three types, namely behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, as well as their evaluation of the use of WhatsApp as a tool for collaborative learning. Other forms of validation were also undertaken for the instrument that was prepared for inclusion in the questionnaire, including the content validation by experts, a pilot study for a few participants to check the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire, exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha.

After students had engaged in several interactive learning activities by chatting in WhatsApp groups, data collection was carried out. In these projects, teachers explained tasks, controlled interaction and gave feedback on group work related to collaborative writing on given topics. Also, students made videos, audio, and images for the learning process. After finishing the tasks, students were requested to answer the questionnaire. The quantitative information that had been gathered was examined in a descriptive manner in order to reveal tendencies in the ways students perceived and engaged in the learning process. At the same time, a review of literature outlined a theoretical and empirical basis for the role of mobile technology in learning ESP. The results of the analysis provide valuable information on how effective the use of WhatsApp group chats is in terms of collaboration and involvement of the students in the learning process at higher educational institutions in Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study focused on student perceptions of ESP learning using WhatsApp media, as one measure to determine the effectiveness of using WhatsApp in increasing student engagement. To determine the perception of students, there are 3 main indicators, namely the attitude of students towards WhatsApp (8 items), the usefulness of WhatsApp (11 items), and constraints on the use of WhatsApp as a learning tool (2 items).

The student perception questionnaire on the use of WhatsApp as a learning medium for ESP was distributed to 32 students of Kumala Nusa College of Business Sciences, Yogyakarta. The results of the average student response (Mean) < 2 entered in the very low category, 2 – 2.49 entered in the low category, 2.5 – 2.99 entered in the medium category, 3 – 3.49 entered in the high category, and ≥ 3.5 entered in the very high category.

In Table 1, the data shows that students have a good perception about the use of WhatsApp in learning ESP, this is indicated by the income of all high scores on the items student attitude to the use of WhatsApp, and the usefulness of WhatsApp. In addition, on the constraint variables in the use of WhatsApp, students showed that the constraints found in the use of WhatsApp were low. That is, students of the Kumala Nusa Business School, Yogyakarta, responded positively to the use of WhatsApp in ESP learning.

The results in Table 1 represents students' positive perception on WhatsApp as means of communication in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. The findings convey that students perceive the utilization of WhatsApp as both engaging and advantageous, with mean scores within the "high" and "very high" categories for the majority of items. For instance, regarding the "Attitude" variable, statements such as "Learning ESP using WhatsApp helps me to discuss any

information easily" and "WhatsApp makes me tied academically with my friends and lecturers, whenever and wherever" achieved mean scores of 3.52. This score reflects a very high level of agreement among participants. However, this demonstrates that students value the convenience and accessibility of WhatsApp in promoting academic communication, although the implications of such reliance warrant further investigation because it may influence traditional learning dynamics. These results align with Vygotsky's (1978) theory, which explains the role of social interaction in cognitive development. WhatsApp's ability to connect students with peers and teachers anytime enhances the collaborative and social aspects of learning, concordant with findings by Bouhnik and Deshen (2014).

Table 1. Students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp in ESP

Variable	Item No.	Statement	Mean	Description
Attitude	1	Learn ESP using WhatsApp is a fun idea	3.32	High
	2	Learn ESP using WhatsApp is the idea that is positive	3.17	High
	3	Learning ESP to use WhatsApp is easier for me	3.24	High
	4	WhatsApp is easy to use to learn ESP	3.24	High
	5	Sharing knowledge will be faster when using WhatsApp	3.44	High
	6	Use WhatsApp helps me to discuss any information easily	3.52	High
	7	I became adept at finding information using WhatsApp	3.34	High
	8	WhatsApp makes me tied academically with my friends and lecturers, whenever and wherever	3.52	Very High
Total			3.35	High
Usefulness	1	WhatsApp is a good medium to support my ESP learning	3.37	High
	2	According to me, WhatsApp is useful in learning my ESP	3.44	High
	3	Learning ESP using WhatsApp to improve my interest and motivation to learn English	3.32	High
	4	By using WhatsApp, the ability to communicate my use of the English Language can be increased by	3.23	High
	5	the Use of WhatsApp can improve my productivity in learning ESP	3.17	High
	6	listening skills my English has improved since using the WhatsApp	3.16	High
	7	the Ability to read my English has improved since using the WhatsApp	3.24	High
	8	the Ability to write in my English has improved because of using WhatsApp	3.32	High
	9	the Ability to speak in my English has improved since using the WhatsApp	3.24	High
	10	Interaction using WhatsApp helps me to be more active in speaking activities	3.24	High
	11	Interaction using WhatsApp improve my confidence in the Language activity	3.17	High
Total			3.26	High
Obstacle	1	Learn ESP using WhatsApp bother me	2.17	Low
	2	I found some problems when learning ESP using WhatsApp	2.09	Low
Total			2.13	Low

The "usefulness" variable increased the mean values of most items, thereby confirming that WhatsApp serves as an effective medium for facilitating ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learning. In particular, statements such as "WhatsApp is a good medium to support my ESP learning" (mean = 3.37) and "Learning ESP through WhatsApp increases my interest and motivation in learning English" (mean = 3.32) highlight the importance of WhatsApp in improving English language learning, student motivation and engagement. Furthermore, students indicated enhancements in particular language skills, including writing (mean = 3.32), reading (mean = 3.24), speaking (mean = 3.24) and listening (mean = 3.16). These results are consistent with previous research, such as those conducted by

Andujar (2016) and Barhoumi (2015), which underline WhatsApp's potential to enhance language proficiency through collaborative and interactive learning frameworks. The platform's features, including instant messaging, voice notes, and multimedia sharing, allow students to practice these skills in real-world scenarios. However, the relatively lower score for listening skills highlights an area for improvement, possibly by integrating more audio-based tasks or resources into the learning activities.

Despite these approving perceptions, the data also bring out the facts about utilization of WhatsApp. The "Obstacle" variable, although generally rated low (mean = 2.13), suggests that a small part of students faced difficulties when using WhatsApp for ESP learning. These difficulties may embrace technical problems, such as inconsistent internet connectivity, or personal difficulty, like a lack of familiarity with WhatsApp's advanced uses. For example, the statement "Learning ESP using WhatsApp bother me" garnered a mean score of 2.17, implying that a small group of students found the experience somewhat frustrating. Refining these challenges is crucial because it can enhance WhatsApp's effectiveness as a learning instrument.

The WhatsApp group chat can also be utilized by teachers for sharing various kinds of texts, pictures, voice recordings and video clips which becomes a great help in the performance of the teacher's duties while enhancing the educational input. This facility corresponds to the aims of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as students deserve to use real items in the profession. Due to the fact that WhatsApp group chats enable students to communicate academic details and receive responses immediately, the chats improve academic conversations and also promote good collaboration skills among the learners. This idea is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) general structural theory of cognitive development which places emphasis on the importance of socialization for knowledge development. For Vygotsky, learning is an activity that has social emphasis and language and interaction with people around are functional to mental development. In relation to ESP, in this case, a smart up model, bogs presents an environment where students can practice the English language in real life situations which is how and when the students will use English.

Feedback from instructors which is constructive and in real-time can be a valuable aid in the students' understanding of the language features that they are grappling with. In connection to this, people can also use voice notes and pictures and screenshots to explain the language rules in a more interesting manner. In this context, feedback enables students to rectify their errors during the discussions and enhance learning. Errors within the discussion threads can be addressed immediately, for example language teachers may correct grammatical errors, suggest alterations and express clarifications related to use of certain vocabulary. Moreover, students' degree of comprehension on what they have also improves together with their mastery in use of language features in classroom discussions. In cases such as these, Gonski & Rawekar, 2017; Wut & Xu, 2021 also support the need for scaffolding language applications with many different media supports them. Learning has been seen as active meaningful engagement, rather than passive reproduction of knowledge. Examples also exist in the form of Gon & Rawekar (2017) and Wut & Xu (2021) where the authors show the use of WhatsApp as an effective means for promoting cross-collaborative language learning. Such combined learning with the tools used through WhatsApp means that the English language is not just learnt in isolation but learnt in contexts making it more effective and functional in ESP contexts.

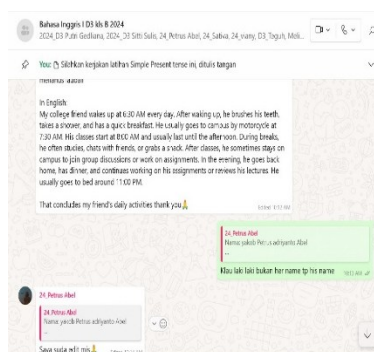


Figure 1. Real time teacher's feedback

Other students as the member of WhatsApp group chat can also learn the correction given by the teacher for their classmate's work. It supports collaborative learning. A study by Bouhnik and Dshen (2014) highlighted that collaborative learning via WhatsApp allows students to learn from both individual feedback and group interaction, thus promoting the development of language skills. Teachers can address common mistakes during discussions, such as incorrect tenses or incorrect use of prepositions, and share targeted examples and exercises with the group. A study conducted by Alqahtani's (2020) presented how mobile technologies could strengthen the feedback goal and thereby contribute to students' acquisition of linguistic features and engagement in ESP.

The use of WhatsApp in facilitating communication between students and teacher in general has been proven to increase student engagement with English learning, and can make students more motivated and more active during the learning process. This is because students show a greater interest in working or studying in smaller groups, as well as a more flexible time and place to study. The use of WhatsApp group discussions has also been proven to provide results from the learning process more optimally, as a result of high student engagement with learning.

In the modern Education, the use of mobile communication media such as WhatsApp can be used as an online learning media. Teacher and students need an effective platform that is considered to be able to provide convenience in carrying out learning activities with more flexible time, so that the students' can feel like they learn ESP in their every day life. The convenience and accessibility of WhatsApp group chats are led to the students' positive attitude that perceived it as an effective medium for learning ESP. For many students, this is an attractive prospect, as simply being able to view learning resources, discuss topics and ask questions at any time means learning can take place outside the classroom and no longer has to end when the bell rings.

In terms of ESP learning in general, it has been proven that the majority of students have a positive perception of the use of WhatsApp in the ESP environment. This implies that ESP students agree that the use of WhatsApp in language learning is easy, useful, and effective in increasing their engagement, interest, confidence, and participation. The comfortable and friendly nature of WhatsApp as a social media also reduces anxiety and makes even the most shy students feel comfortable enough to participate in discussions. It is therefore important to mention that students do not only see WhatsApp as a communication tool but also as a supportive environment for collaborative learning and language use. This is essential for mastering ESP as it focuses on communication skills in real-world situations, which are closely related to the field of study and require repetition and situated practice (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

CONCLUSION

It's all but axiomatic that for students in an ESP course, a greater level of engagement will lead to better results. It was noted that helpful educational materials, pleasant atmosphere while learning, reasonable workload, and various ways of how the course is taught, are essentials for the students' involvements. Teachers and learners have acknowledged that group discussions over WhatsApp helped to achieve these aims because the students became more active. There are favourable conditions for the use of WhatsApp as a means in the ESP context, owing to students' positive perceptions of it amongst other factors. Students did risk encountering some challenges when relying on WhatsApp which this research successfully highlights.

In this case, the originality of this study rests on the fact that it provides evidence of the capacity of social networks half disciplines in active participation and involvement within the context of the ESP courses. It also emphasizes the suitable incorporation of mobile devices as a means of overcoming the problems posed by an interactive classroom environment. Although it is limited, for instance, owing to the small number of subjects and for some of the conclusions being based on literature reviews, this work offers a direction for further investigations. It is recommended in such work that more detailed research be carried out on particular aspects, namely the role of WhatsApp in different categories of ESP courses or the role of WhatsApp in students from different backgrounds.

Pragmatically, the study proposes the introduction of ESP WhatsApp group discussions as part of the course to make learning more enjoyable and less rigid. Colombi and Lantolf (2005) are of the view that Teacher educators should consider the use of WhatsApp groups to give instructions, issue

materials, and coordinate joint tasks with students but take care of the challenges such as technology problems and over reliance on the web. In professional contexts, this would, in turn, motivate students to become more active participants thus improving the ESP learning outcomes.

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