

WHATSAPP TO TEACH ENGLISH REMOTELY IN A LOW-TECH CLASS: TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Fitriani

¹ STAIN Mandailing Natal, North Sumatera
Corresponding authors' email: fitriemje@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed at addressing English teacher's perspective about integrating WhatsApp (WA) into a university-level English class in STAIN Mandailing Natal. The data included interviews with the teacher and observation on class postings in WA group and student-teacher timeline for four meetings. The data were analyzed qualitatively, and interpretively, resulting in three emerging themes about the WA to teach English remotely in low-tech classroom: the implementation of WA for online teaching, managing online learning activities in WA group and teacher's constraints in applying WA in teaching online. The result of analysis indicated that WA is considered effective to teach English remotely in a limited internet connection classroom. With some adjustments to the instructional design, teaching and learning process could run well. However, due to the lack of students-teacher direct interaction, virtual class could not go as engaging as face-to-face learning in the classroom.

Keywords: low-tech class, perspective, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has been dramatically impacting education and resulting school closure at around the globe. This forces educational institutions to turn the learning process from face-to-face learning to virtual classroom where teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Therefore, online learning using video conferencing platform has become prominent and is widely used by education practitioners.

However, online teaching is not always the best alternative for any learning environment since its usage relies highly on a steady internet connection, consistent electricity, and working technology. In Indonesia, particularly, not all regions are equipped with adequate internet infrastructure, nor do all students can afford regular and reliable internet data. This has created major challenges for teachers in organizing effective online learning through such platform.

For classes with very limited internet connections as happens in the majority of schools in Indonesia, it is necessary to consider using a platform that is more in line with current class conditions. WhatsApp as a mobile messenger app is considered as one of

the most recommended online teaching and learning platform (British Council, 2019). Unlike digital video conferencing tools, the use of WhatsApp relatively requires far less internet data, it can be used both for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Unlike digital video conferencing tools, the use of WhatsApp relatively requires far less internet data, it can be used both for synchronous and asynchronous learning. It can also be accessed through almost all digital devices such as smartphones or computers. Its features such as voice note, video call, voice call, group etc. allows its users to share texts, images, videos, audios as well as doing conference or group call which in educational context enables teaching and learning activities organized more engaging.

WhatsApp

The concept of WhatsApp is simple: share text-style messages to the others using the platform, but without paying data charges. It has gathered more than 700 million fans and this app is the world's most popular messaging platform (Milanovic, 2013). WhatsApp has become the "communication portal" for social networking that has quickly changed the way people communicate (Susilo, 2014). It is one of the evolutions which has been frequently used on particular mobile phones and computers (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). As an exclusive, cross-platform instant messaging subscription service which is available on the new generation of smart phones such as iPhone, Android, Blackberry and Nokia mobile phones, WhatsApp allows its users to send free text messages to each that is, users are not charged for a text sent through WhatsApp (Hindu, 2011).

This is because WhatsApp sends messages through an internet data connection. It should be mentioned that many other, different message types, from simple text to pictures to audio files and videos as well as one's location using integrated mapping features are supported by WhatsApp (Alsalem, 2013). With social networks rapidly gaining prominence in this scenario, WhatsApp is emerging as a tool that can be used for different educational purposes. WhatsApp is already being used to teach vocabulary or to disseminate general information and links for language learning.

Nowadays, mobile phones have become a crucial part of our daily life. Every individual has a personal cell phone of their own. Mobile phones have been expanding rapidly since 1995 (Chowdhury, Verdnik, Breznic, & Prihavec, 2012). They are employed not only for sending text messages and making calls, but also for the other varieties of applications such as watch a movie, play music and access internet. Many operating systems such as Windows, Mobile, IOS and Android are developed to give more functionality in mobiles. Android applications are currently being developed (Susilo, 2014). Lenhart, Madden, Smith, and Macgill (2009) claimed that "these kinds of messaging technologies are greatly applied among undergraduate learners nowadays" (p. 78).

METHODOLOGY

This case study was to gain a better understanding of how an English teacher integrated WhatsApp into her speaking online class. This approach allows researchers to examine a situation analytically and comprehensively. According to Casanave (2010), a case study essentially involves three features: including the researchers' interest in the uniqueness of a case, in-depth details of a case, and a demonstration of a thorough understanding of the context where a case is situated. Through a close exploration into participant's experiences, a real life situation can be portrayed and evaluated.

The research was conducted in Department of English Language Education of STAIN Mandailing Natal, North Sumatera. The objective of this case study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of a speaking teacher's experience on using WhatsApp in teaching speaking remotely in a low-tech class. To collect the relevant data, the researcher interviewed an English teacher of the college and documented the WhatsApp group posting timeline. Further, fifteen English students, six males and eleven females, who were officially registered in speaking course, were participated in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings in this study are derived from the comprehensive analysis of the interview with the English teacher and the observation of whatsapp group and student-teacher timeline. The detail description is presented as follows:

Implementing WhatsApp to Teach English Remotely

The first thing that teachers do when using WhatsApp to teach English online is to learn various references regarding the use of WhatsApp in the learning process. From these references, the teacher then redeveloped the lesson plan including the detailed activities that will be applied during the learning process. The next step was creating an open WhatsApp group and invites all students to join the group. After making sure all students are included in the group, then the teacher announced that the entire learning process during campus closure would be enacted through WhatsApp. The teacher also informed them in detail the rules that must be obeyed during the learning process in the group. Meeting schedules, learning materials, type of assessment, assessment techniques are also presented to students.

During the four meetings of the speaking class that takes place online, the material taught are as follows: (1) at the grocery (2) at the restaurant (3) at the bank and (4) mid-term test. From the WhatsApp timeline, it can be concluded that the teacher did

the learning process with the same phase as face-to-face learning, namely pre-teaching, while teaching and post teaching. In pre-teaching, the teacher greeted students and checked their attendance. The teacher also asked some interesting questions to attract student engagement.

Teachers often used games for material reinforcement. It was seen that students were more active during learning with games. Students' participation increases significantly when they had to compete with friends to answer questions from the teacher. Besides games, the teacher used different types of activities during learning. In the second meeting, the teacher uses the feature group call to practice speaking with students. Alternately, the teacher calls 5 students together and practiced using utterances that have been learned at that session. At the fourth meeting, the teacher used voice call to call one by one of the students to interview students in order to administer the mid-term test. The teacher calls students about 3 to 5 minutes to give questions that students answered orally. From interviews with teacher, it can be concluded that students were enthusiastic about taking the spoken test session using voice calls. They were more confident since they did not have to appear face to face with the teacher and witnessed by classmates.

In post teaching, teacher reviewed the material by asking students some questions. The teacher then checked student attendance by asking students to say their names together. Afterward, she summarized the learning process and prepares to leave the classroom.

Managing Learning Activities through WhatsApp

The teacher realizes that the teaching and learning online on digital devices is not easy especially as this was done during the pandemic. With these considerations, the teacher tried as much as possible to arrange the expert class so that it continues to run well. First, the teacher reviewed the learning design by lightening the learning objectives, reducing number of learning activities, including reducing the assessment standards. This was to reduce the burden of student learning at once so that students could keep the lesson up easily.

Since students' limitations to reach adequate internet data, teaching materials were distributed a few days before online learning took place. This was to give them enough time to download the required learning materials as when learning begun all students were ready for further discussion. It also aimed to give them sufficient time to study the material and when learning took place, have already had prior knowledge and be more participatory in the learning process. Besides, the teacher used various kinds of learning to avoid boredom. Online classes through WhatsApp were not only dominated by text messaging discussions but also audio, video exchanges and group call conversations.

Discussion

Teaching English online is tremendously challenging for teachers to set and hard to supervise. In online learning, students are indicated to behave less disciplined and triggered to do plagiarism. Some students were found to be only present at the beginning of class yet were not actively participating in the learning process. Furthermore, in fulfilling learning tasks, they tend to copy other's answers and upload it on the timeline as if it was the result of their thoughts. To avoid this, the teacher strives to continue monitoring students' attendance by involving them randomly in each discussion of the material. In terms of plagiarism, the teacher personalizes each learning task. Assignments are designed to require students to provide specific and authentic answers which are almost impossible to be cheated. In addition, feedbacks were given privately. Student assignments are not posted in the group but are uploaded directly to the teacher's account and at the same time the teacher also gives feedback privately.

Learning face-to-face in the classroom cannot directly be transferred to a virtual classroom. Even though the teacher has re-designed their learning instruction and made some efforts to be consistent in implementing it in the classroom, learning did not proceed as planned. Due to the barrier of communication, teachers were struggling to monitor relationships with students during the learning process. If previously the teacher was able to carry out drilling activities with the entire students together in class, online teaching allows teachers to do it only with some of them in a complicated turns. If students are having internet connection problems during real-time learning, the teacher cannot insist them to keep on staying in the virtual classroom. In such situations, there is no other options, she have to conduct asynchronous learning where the teacher can personally contact the person and take follow-up actions so that they can continue to follow the learning.

CONCLUSION

WhatsApp application allows teachers to continue learning online even though students had problems in accessing sufficient internet connection. Online classes run relatively smooth and learning is still progressing. The teacher is still able to manage the class well and students can continue to learn. However, this research is limited to interviews and timeline observations on WhatsApp learning groups. The data description is dominantly based on teacher's perspective. In the future, it is highly recommended to take into account students' opinions by administering questionnaire, for example, to get a complete picture of this study. Further research is expected to be able to analyze in detail the application of various learning techniques as well as the assessment methods used.

Finally, the results of this study are expected to provide preliminary information about how the online learning process is carried out in a low-tech classroom and subsequently can be an evaluation point which will ultimately improve the quality of the English teaching and learning process.

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