WHAT'S UP IN WHATSAPP CLASSROOM: EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTION IN LEARNING SPEAKING THROUGH WHATSAPP DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to find out students' perception and challenges in learning speaking through WhatsApp which was designed with quantitative-descriptive approach in the form of online survey study. The survey was distributed to 51 EFL students at State Islamic University of Mataram. The students' responses were coded and displayed descriptively into two main themes: students' perception and students' challenges. It was found that most of the students, 33 students or 64.7%, perceived WhatsApp as an effective learning platform because it could improve their speaking skill due to its usefulness and ease of use. However, there were 10 students or 19.6% of the students who claimed that WhatsApp was not an effective tool because it was not equipped with more practical features. The students also found it difficult to understand teachers' explanation through WhatsApp. Another perception is neutral because the students believed that WhatsApp had both advantages and drawbacks. There were 8 students or 15.7% of them perceiving this. Even though the majority of the students showed positive attitude toward WhatsApp-based learning, they agreed to say that they experienced technical, practical and mental challenges during the learning. These challenges need to be anticipated by the teachers and students toward an effective online learning through WhatsApp.

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Keywords: *whatsapp classroom, technical problems, practical problems, mental problems*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered as the most difficult skill among the four skills in learning English language. It is part of productive skill that forces the language learners to have an output in particular communication context. Language learners often find it difficult to produce sentences toward an effective communication if they do not have input that gathers from reading, listening or other sources. Moreover, speaking is considered as a simultaneous process in constructing meaning which covers producing, receiving, and processing some information (Brown, 2000). However, it

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seems more problematic to learn speaking during the pandemic Covid-19. As a matter of fact, speaking should involve not only verbal language but also body language. These will create an effective communication as the speakers and listeners are able to create a mutual understanding and it is possible for them to clarify some miscommunication. In the context of learning, it is also essential to communicate directly where students and teachers might find it more effective. However, as the universities and schools should be closed during the pandemic, teachers seem to struggle to find the most appropriate way to teach speaking. A creative teacher will generate technology to enhance their teaching. In the 21st century, it could not be denied that not only is the education system developing rapidly, but also technology has invaded our life. It is why technology and education are believed to be inseparable.

The advancement of technologies has affected students' learning styles and teaching methods in educational context (Warman, 2018). Minister of Education and Culture Republic of Indonesia recommended teachers to use various e-learning platforms such as Rumah Belajar, Quipper School, Ruang Guru, Google Classroom, Zoom etc, where currently these platforms are getting more and more popular in education as teachers and students widely use and install them (Agung, Surtikanti, & Quinones, 2020). However, due to technical problems, many teachers use electronic mobile device application such as WhatsApp. It is one of the most favorable platforms used for social interaction and educational purpose. It is functioned for instant messaging in the form of text, document, pictures and videos. Furthermore, using WhatsApp enables us to communicate via voice call or video call. A learning can be designed and managed through WhatsApp group where teachers and students interact, discuss and share ideas (Mistar & Embi, 2016) either through text messages or voice notes. In addition, it is the most popular mobile device application because it enables teachers and students learn and work collaboratively and practically within online classroom interaction context (Mbukusa, 2018). Classroom interaction seems very crucial because interaction is the requirement to construct and to share knowledge as explained by the social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It is also pivotal to build a good rapport between teachers and students that will lead to the positive, enjoyable and respectful relationship (Harmer, 2007).

The present study attempts to explore EFL students' perception and challenges on the use of WhatsApp group in learning speaking. The students experienced learning in WhatsApp group for one semester. Almost all lecturers generated WhatsApp in the beginning university closures that shifted learning into online due to Covid-19 pandemic. They shared four main themes during the learning, as what Cansoy (2017) noted, such as theme related to the field of knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, teaching practices and emotional support.

Many studies have revealed that Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) like WhatsApp is an effective tool to ensure students' attendance, to boost students' motivation and to increase their confidence level (Hamad, 2017). Harandi (2015) also pointed out that online learning played very significant role in higher education. His study confirmed that online learning was able to affect students' motivation level. The study from Han & Keskin (2016) and Ali & Ali Bin-Hady (2019) also strengthened the positive impact of learning speaking through WhatsApp where students successfully lessen their speaking anxiety. It is because of the numerous practical uses of WhatsApp where students are able to open the group anytime and anywhere without

requiring particular preparation. It is also possible for them to send a voice note to practice their speaking without video. It enables those shy students to record or directly send their voice notes without direct face-to-face communication which is important to exercise their confidence and motivation level as well as their willingness to learn foreign language (Plana et al., 2013). WhatsApp features are also completed with chat, status and calls that can effectively elevate students' language skills due to its accessibility, interactivity, immediacy and permanency (Sa'aleek, 2014). Furthermore, Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008) claim that language learners potentially use WhatsApp to autonomously improve their language skill. Furthermore, study conducted by Rafizah et al. (2015) also confirmed that most of students had positive perception on digital learning because it improved the learning quality. It has shown many practical and useful function of WhatsApp if the teachers can generate and manage an effective mobile based learning system such as WhatsApp group.

In terms of students' perspectives, study conducted by Mistar & Embi (2016) found that students showed a high level of attitudes toward WhatsApp as their learning platform because it was easy to use, easy to learn and fast to share knowledge that helped the students to conduct active interaction and discussion. It is in accordance with the study by Gasaymeh (2017) where students perceived the integration of WhatsApp in learning positively due to the easiness, fun and usefulness. In speaking context, students found WhatsApp voice notes as an attractive, positive and easy to use where students were able to practice speaking especially for narrative text and they could request for a help to WhatsApp group members anytime (Nurazizah, Friatin, & Sugiarto, 2019). One of the aspects of speaking that can be repeatedly practice through WhatsApp is pronunciation where most students showed their positive perception on this point (Ghee, Terng, & Chui, 2019). They believed that by listening to audio text such as podcast, they can enhance poor and weak pronunciation. The learners may individualize their learning through a self-correction strategy as they can monitor and check their pronunciations' errors and mistakes while rehearsing for recording and exposing themselves more into English (Han & Keskin, 2016). Moreover, a study conducted by Çetinkaya & Sütçü (2018) further highlighted aspect of vocabularies improvement that can be affected by learning via WhatsApp where students consider more effective rather than Facebook platform.

However, students' perspective should be fairly measured not only from positive point of view, but also negative point of view. Since technology is like two blades, weakness always lays in strength. Apart from its positivity, unpleasant experiences from learning speaking through WhatsApp need to be highlighted. Chinnery (2006) comprehensively evaluated the drawbacks of generating WhatsApp as an educational platform dealing with learning quality such as limited nonverbal communications, a lack of cultural context, and potentially limited social interaction. In consequence, students will never experience those substantial values of learning because they cannot interact face-to-face to build a close relationship and cultural communication awareness. Furthermore, he also highlighted potential-technical problems such as limited message lengths, reduced screen sized, limited audiovisual quality, virtual keyboarding error, one finger data entry, limited power life, connection problems or blank spot area where internet access will never be found.

García-Gómez (2020) argued that lack of interaction in WhatsApp lead to the lack of pragmatic competence that may constraint students to be able to communicate effectively. Furthermore, he claims that interaction in WhatsApp is not a natural context

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for non-native language users, so the students will find it difficult to acquire appropriate and relevant utterances when communicating with native English speakers. The conclusion of his research reveals that most students perceive learning with WhatsApp negatively according to the above-mentioned reasons.

Another study also found that, challenges does not only come from students' point of view, but also come from the teachers' side where students were only instructed for discussion, while teachers were not eager to interact to check students' understanding or do the scaffolding (Annamalai, 2018). It indicates that teachers may find it difficult to build an interactive communication with the students through WhatsApp. It then results in the monotonous learning environment where teachers act as the instructor, not facilitator. They tend to give instruction and a set of assignments without explaining and scaffolding.

Discussing positive and negative perspectives of technology in education cannot be separated from Rogers' theory on diffusion of innovation as stated by Popovici & Mironov (2015). He mentions three factors that might influence users' perception: relative advantage, compatibility and complexity. Relative advantage is about the perception of users on particular product of technology comparing to other products, while compatibility is about the degree of current values on technology. Last but not least, complexity is about the difficulties to understand or use the product of technology. In more detail, Davis et al. (1985) through Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) focuses on looking at usefulness and ease of use as the main factors that influence students' perceptions, while Venkatesh et al. (2003) adds other factors related to external one such as social influence and availability of training and support.

The current study attempts to fill the gap on investigating both positive and negative perceptions from the students as well as try to reveal the challenges experienced by them. Most of the studies focus on exploring positive sides of using WhatsApp without fairly looking at the contradictive sides of it according to the students' point of view.

METHOD

The study is designed with quantitative-descriptive approach in the form of online survey study. The statistic result of the survey is displayed in table and descriptively elaborated. There were three main items prescribed in the questionnaire: demography, perception and challenges. The questions were developed in open-ended where students were able to share their experiences in learning speaking through WhatsApp. In term of students' perception, the responses were coded intro three main themes: positive perception, negative perception and neutral perception. The definition of positive and negative perceptions is pretty much clear, but the researchers need to clarify the definition of neutral perception where the students address both positive and negative perceptions.

The questionnaire was distributed to each class after one-semester learning, so the students have already had insight and experience on learning through WhatsApp group. However, the students are not compulsorily instructed to fill out the questionnaire, hence, there were only 51 of them who willingly filled out the Google form. The entire students are EFL students sitting in semester 2 of English Language Education Department, State Islamic University of Mataram in academic year 2020/2021. During the learning, the lecturer normally designed the classroom by creating a WhatsApp group, then set up the rules to trigger students' active involvement in the learning, provided the

learning materials and evaluated the learning. The evaluation does not only cover the substantial materials but also practical use of WhatsApp. It is important to familiarize students with WhatsApp based English learning (Susanti & Tarmuji, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting a robust data analysis, it was found that there were three types of perceptions from students on the use of WhatsApp as a learning platform in speaking class: positive perception, negative perception and neutral perception. Positive perception means students perceive the advantages of using WhatsApp in learning speaking, while negative perception indicates the disadvantages of using WhatsApp in learning speaking. However, it is seldom to find neutral attitudes of students discussed in the literature but it is useful to depict students' perspective in the current study who stand in between where they claim WhatsApp brings both advantages and drawbacks at the same time.

According to the data displayed in the table 1 below, it is clearly revealed that most students show positive perception toward mobile based learning using WhatsApp. There are 33 students or 64.7% who agree to say that learning speaking through WhatsApp brings more benefits. Those positive attitudes were mostly determined by the practicality of using WhatsApp where the students were able to practice speaking with their peers and teachers. WhatsApp has very complete features to practice speaking both through voice note, voice call or video call either in individual or group practice. These enable students to practice anytime and anywhere to build interactivity with peers and teachers. The finding confirms the study conducted by Sa'aleek (2014) where students have positive attitude toward WhatsApp based learning due to its function to build an effective interaction between students and teachers. Building such good rapport between teachers and students will create a positive vibes of learning, enjoyable communication and respectful relationship (Harmer, 2007). The finding also emphasizes the factors that influence Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) proposed by (Davis et al., 1985) which are the ease of use and usefulness. Another significant factor was the effectiveness of WhatsApp in improving learning quality because the students had the same right to speak and easily got the correction from peers and teachers. This finding is in accordance with studies conducted by Han & Keskin (2016) and Rafizah et al. (2015) in which students are benefited from peers' correction on pronunciation and vocabulary choice. Furthermore, Bensalem (2018) also pointed out the finding of his study in which students in experimental group who learned using WhatsApp outperformed those in controlled group in terms of academic achievement.

Other three reasons why students have positive perception on the use of WhatsApp in learning speaking are ease of use, low cost, simplicity and usefulness. They assumed that learning with WhatsApp made them more relaxed and enjoyable as they did not need to open a video like video conference application. They could learn based on their own learning style and adjusted it in a comfortable position. They also argued that learning through WhatsApp was cheap as it did not require a high speed of internet access. These findings are the same as what had been studied by Mistar & Embi (2016) and Gasaymeh (2017).

On the other hand, there are 10 students or 19.6% who have shown negative perception on the use of WhatsApp as learning platform in speaking course. According to

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the response, students believed that learning WhatsApp was not effective because they did not understand easily the teachers' explanation. Teachers might explain the materials shortly by using voice note and let the students have a discussion. Due to this condition, they felt that there was no lesson given by the teacher. In addition, some teachers just provide instruction for the students to run a discussion without being involved or controlled in the flow of discussion. It is in line with the study conducted by Annamalai (2018) that criticized the role of teachers who should manage and control the online classroom. Chinnery (2006) clearly addressed these issues as lack of cultural context and limited social interaction, while García-Gómez (2020) mentioned this condition as lack of pragmatic competence that may constraint students to be able to communicate effectively. These factors may result in ineffectiveness, inefficiency and difficulties in understanding the material.

Last but not least, neutral perception is the position where students generally believe that WhatsApp has advantages and drawbacks. There are 8 students or 15.7% of them that suppose WhatsApp is the most appropriate tool for learning during Covid-19 pandemic as university has not designed more interactive learning platform. However, they also provide several suggestions and recommendation to improve learning quality through WhatsApp. They suggest the teachers to strictly manage the WhatsApp group by applying group rules. Consequently, group members have to actively participate during the learning, otherwise they may get punishment. To conclude, the result of students' responses analysis on their perception of using WhatsApp in speaking class can be viewed in the following table.

Table 1: Students' perceptions

Perception	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Positive	Ease of use	3	5.9%	33 64.7%
	Low cost	1	2.0%	
	Simplicity	4	7.8%	
	Usefulness	5	9.8%	
	Improvement	10	19.6%	
	Practicality	10	19.6%	
Negative	Repetition	1	2.0%	10 19.7%
	No feeling	1	2.0%	
	Inefficiency	2	3.9%	
	Difficulties	3	5.9%	
	Ineffectiveness	3	5.9%	
Neutral	Both positive and negative	8	15.6%	8 15.6%
Total				51 100%

The second theme of the questionnaire is students' challenges in learning speaking through WhatsApp. It is clearly seen from the table below that students experienced three types of challenges or problems: technical problems, practical problems and mental problems. Most students find technical problems during learning

speaking in WhatsApp group. There are 39 students or 76.5% of them experienced technical problems in form of unavailability of signal and internet access as well as phone memory and limited WhatsApp features factors. These findings are the same with study conducted by Chinnery (2006) in terms of technical problems in learning through WhatsApp that include connection problems as well as internal mobile phone and mobile application problems such as limited message length, limited audio and video quality, limited memory storage capacity and limited battery life.

Another problem is practical problems where students were not able to improve their skill because their learning was not real. It is impossible for them to practice speaking directly and receive feedback as what effective communication requires. Sometimes, it was difficult for them to take their turn in practice speaking due to unclear rules provided by the teachers. It made the class uncontrollable. There are 10 students or 19.6% of them felt that practical problems become their major constraints to successfully join the virtual classroom in WhatsApp group. The last problem was in form of mental problems. Learning through WhatsApp, for some students, could not increase their confidence level. They still felt shy when practicing speaking because they thought that all group members would listen to their voice and correct their pronunciation or fluency. For those two students, direct correction in face-to-face classroom was more beneficial and more effective compared to those in WhatsApp group. It is contradictive with findings from several studies that claim learning speaking through WhatsApp is effective in leveling up confidence level and reduce the anxiety (Hamad, 2017; Han & Keskin, 2016). More detail findings can be seen from the table below. To conclude, the result of students' responses analysis on their challenges of using WhatsApp in speaking class can be viewed in the following table.

Table 2: Students' challenges

Type	Description	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Technical Problems	Signal	14	27.5%	39 76,5%
	Internet access	12	23.5%	
	WhatsApp features	7	13.7%	
	Phone memory	6	11.8%	
Practical Problems	Cannot speak directly	8	15.7%	10 19.6%
	Uncontrollable	1	2.0%	
	Do not get turn	1	2.0%	
Mental Problems	Shyness	2	3.9%	2 3.9%
Total				51 100%

CONCLUSION

Most of students have shown positive perception on the use of WhatsApp as mobile-based learning. There are six main reasons why they perceive WhatsApp

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positively: practicality, improvement, usefulness, simplicity, low cost and ease of use. On the other hand, those who have shown negative perception argue that WhatsApp is not effective and efficient learning platform because they find it difficult to understand teachers' explanation and many repetitions happen during the learning. The last perception was neutral perception. These students prefer to comment on both positive and negative attitudes. Another theme investigated in this study is the challenges faced the students. All students agreed to indicate that WhatsApp was not such perfect platform. In fact, when it went to practice, it had some drawbacks including technical, practical and mental problems. It is suggested that WhatsApp can be generated as one of mobile-based online learning platforms. However, teachers have to set a clear lesson plan and rules to manage and control students' interaction in the group. Finally, from this research, it is prescribed that many activities can be conducted through WhatsApp group. It is time for teachers to be more creative in using certain platform and integrate it in their teaching. Due to its usefulness and ease of use, it can be applied as communication tool in virtual team activities or teamwork through, for example, role-play game (Urien, Erro-Garcés, & Osca, 2019). In addition, teachers need to have strategy to generate WhatsApp as a platform in teaching speaking such as setting a clear timing for sharing information, materials and assignment, making a clear rules as a members' guideline as well as making sure the students have sufficient internet access and signal as the consideration to set an assignment.

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