

Hooked to WhatsApp. Can we take advantage of it?

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Abstract. The implementation of technology in the classroom has allowed language teachers to promote and adopt student-centred approaches. Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) applications are on the frontline as one of the most widely used social networking platforms holding great potential for language learning and teaching. This preliminary study tries to understand if Spanish teenagers and young adults who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) consider MIM as a significant learning platform that can help improve and support their language learning skills. The survey target participants were 22 students, aged 13 to 18, who study EFL as an extracurricular activity in a private language school. This study suggests that MIMs can be useful support tools and motivating for students. It also shows willingness of participants towards the use of MIM in their classroom.

Keywords: MIM, WhatsApp, instant messaging, normalisation.

1. Introduction

Mobile technologies have increased substantially in recent years, and are changing quickly year by year, giving teachers the opportunity of implementing mobile technology in the classroom, allowing them to promote and adopt student-centred approaches (Tayan, 2017).

Industry reports that there has been a significant growth of people owning smartphones, and using MIM applications such as WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, among others (Statista, 2019). The generation we are educating these days have become addicted to these apps for social interaction and pleasure.

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Therefore, MIM applications have emerged as potential tools to enhance learning English as a second language (Andújar, 2019; Tang & Hew, 2017).

Realising the importance of MIM applications and education co-evolving in mutually supportive roles to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning (Tan & So, 2014), the objective of this study is to explore and identify the motivations and reluctance of Spanish teenagers and young adults who study EFL through the use of mobile instant messaging applications used as support tools for various classroom activities.

2. Method

2.1. Population

Twenty-two students (N=22), 16 female and six male, aged 13 to 18, participated in this study. They all study EFL in a language school near Barcelona. They are all bilingual Catalan/Spanish. Ten students were taking a B1 course³, and 11 students were taking a C1 level course at the time of the study.

2.2. Instruments and context

The instruments used to collect the data of this study were a pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire, and observations of the students' performances and interactions when using WhatsApp. Both questionnaires were in English and Spanish to ensure students' comprehension.

Questions in the pre-questionnaire were designed to gain a better understanding of their willingness to use a MIM app as a support tool in the EFL classroom, and their preferred application.

Taking the information we gathered from the pre-questionnaire into consideration, a WhatsApp group was created for each group, B1 and C1, as it was the most popular instant messaging application among them. In these WhatsApp groups, a series of activities were carried out (see Figure 3). By the end of the course, students were given a post-questionnaire to ascertain their opinions about the experience.

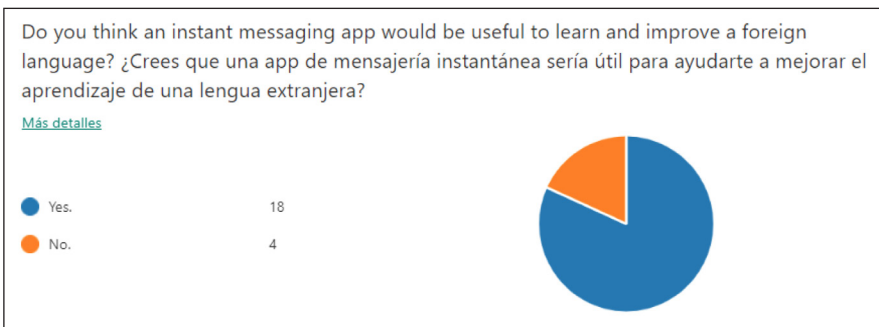
3. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Students' pre-questionnaire results

Figure 1 shows that students believe that an instant messaging application would be useful to learn and improve one's ability in a foreign language. The four students who did not believe an application would be useful in this regard, referred to the fact that people did not write correctly when using an instant messaging application. The majority of the students thought it would be useful because they could improve their communication.

Figure 1. Students' opinions on the use of MIM in the classroom



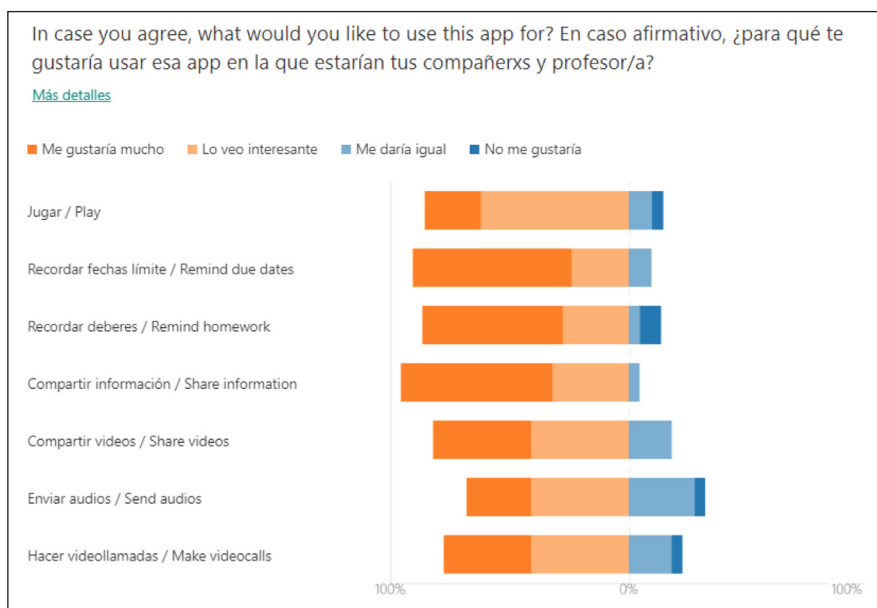
When students were asked whether they would agree to use an instant messaging application in the classroom as a support tool, ten of them were willing to, 11 were indifferent, and one student was not willing. However, when they were asked whether they would agree to their teacher creating a group so that they could communicate with their classmates and instructor, the majority (19) responded positively.

Figure 2 shows that 66.7% of students would like to use this application to remind them of their due dates; 63.6% to share information; 59.1% of students would like to use this application to remind them of their homework; 40.9% of students would like to share videos, 36.4% would like to make video calls; 27.3% would like to send audio files, and 23.8% would like to play (Kahoots, having fun sharing memes, and so on).

Students showed a positive attitude towards using MIM applications in the classroom as a support tool. WhatsApp is the application the majority of students

know and use, and that is why we decided to use it in the classroom. Accordingly, some tasks and activities were prepared, taking into account the students' responses (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. Students' motives to use instant messaging application



3.2. Students' post-questionnaire results

Fourteen out of the 22 students answered the post-questionnaire.

Students answered the activity they liked the most was having fun, followed by solving doubts, speaking tasks, sharing videos, and deadlines reminders, and the one they liked the least was the extra practice (Figure 3). Students gave several reasons for these answers:

- they enjoyed these kinds of activities;
- they had a lot of fun, and it was an excellent way to stay in touch after the lessons;
- they could solve doubts after class;

- such activities make the atmosphere in the group very pleasant;
- it was a good way to exchange information and connect better with the teacher; and
- it helped them catch up if they missed a lesson.

Figure 3. Students' preferences of activities



When they were asked which activity they had found the most useful, the majority mentioned that it was the speaking tasks and sharing videos, followed by the fact that doubts (grammar, deadlines, homework, and so on) were solved very quickly.

When asked which activity they had considered the least useful, the majority said they had all been useful for different reasons. One student stated that the speaking task was challenging because it was difficult for them to record audios, and another one said that sharing videos was not very useful because you only see and listen to the video, with no real purpose.

3.3. Observations of students' performances and interactions

Four students who were active in the classroom were not very active in the WhatsApp group. Conversely, six students who were not very active in the classroom were engaged in the WhatsApp group and participated. Three students did not participate in the interaction in the WhatsApp group, but sent private messages to the teacher when in doubt (grammar, deadlines, homework, and so on). One student who was

not active during the lessons was not very active in the WhatsApp group either. The rest of the students (eight) were both active in the classroom and the WhatsApp group. The students taking B1 used Spanish most of the time to communicate with each other, although they tried to use English when addressing the teacher.

An unplanned activity that emerged in the WhatsApp groups was the unexpected exchange of memes and stickers related to the topics of learning activities; all these in the target language.

4. Conclusions

While students reported in the pre-questionnaire that they would find WhatsApp useful for reminders and observations, post-questionnaire findings revealed that interaction with others and knowledge exchange were the aspects that they enjoyed the most. The discrepancies between the expectations of students before and after taking part in WhatsApp activities indicate that the implementation of new activities should not be restricted to what the students may suggest in pre-questionnaires.

WhatsApp's most popular uses found in this study were linked to fun activities and the immediate access to responses to their doubts (grammar, deadlines, homework, and so on). It is not surprising as participants are used to using WhatsApp in general, sharing humorous expressions through memes and stickers, and immediate interaction with others.

This study indicates that using MIM can be a valuable support and motivational resource for students, and demonstrates their willingness to use MIM in their EFL classroom. In this study, WhatsApp provided all students, including those who are not very involved in the classroom, with communicative opportunities to learn indirectly both outside and inside the classroom. However, further research with a larger number of students and in different contexts is needed to address the question of how the use of MIM in the classroom can be normalised (Bax, 2011).

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