

USING WHATSAPP IN AN ONLINE TEFL COURSE: EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of mobile messaging applications in online learning environments has created opportunities for EFL practices. This study aimed to describe teaching and learning activities using WhatsApp and to examine EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of its use in an online TEFL course. A descriptive quantitative design was employed. The data was collected through classroom observation and a survey. The participants were 19 sixth-semester students enrolled in a TEFL course. Observational data were collected from WhatsApp chat histories and survey data were obtained through an 18-item questionnaire covering three dimensions, namely ease, learning activities, and benefits. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative interpretation. The findings revealed that students engaged in a variety of learning activities, including participating in discussions, responding to peers, initiating questions, sharing ideas, and reflecting on learning. Students also demonstrated active participations in peer interaction and discussion. In terms of perceptions, they viewed WhatsApp positively, highlighting its ease of use, accessibility, and relevance to course objectives. However, its contribution to deeper pedagogical content understanding was perceived as moderate. These findings suggest that WhatsApp can serve as an effective tool for promoting interactive and collaborative learning in online TEFL course practice, although more structured pedagogical strategies are needed to enhance students' learning outcomes during the online learning.

Keywords: EFL pre-service teachers, learning activities, online learning, TEFL, WhatsApp

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of digital technologies into higher education has significantly transformed teaching and learning practices. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education, classroom activities increasingly incorporate various technological platforms to support instructional processes and student engagement. Among these platforms, WhatsApp has gained widespread popularity, particularly in Indonesia, due to its accessibility, ease of use, and positive impact on communication and learning. Consequently, WhatsApp is frequently utilized to extend interaction beyond the classroom and to facilitate learning in online environments, including Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) courses.

The increasing adoption of mobile technologies in education is closely associated with the concept of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which emphasizes flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for continuous learning. Messaging applications such as WhatsApp enable students to participate in discussions, share learning resources, and collaborate in real time, thereby creating more dynamic and interactive learning experiences. Furthermore, the integration of such technologies can be understood through the framework of Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), which highlights the importance of aligning

technological tools with pedagogical strategies and subject content. This framework is particularly relevant in TEFL courses, where pre-service teachers are required not only to develop language proficiency but also to acquire the skills necessary to integrate technology effectively into their future teaching practices.

Despite these theoretical and practical advantages, a critical issue remains regarding the extent to which WhatsApp supports meaningful learning processes within teacher education contexts. While previous studies have generally reported positive outcomes associated with the use of WhatsApp, much of the existing research has focused on general language learning rather than on pedagogical content courses. As a result, there is still limited understanding of how WhatsApp facilitates learning processes that contribute to the development of pedagogical content knowledge, reflective thinking, and professional awareness among pre-service teachers, particularly in fully online TEFL courses.

This gap is particularly important because pre-service teachers are expected to develop not only English language proficiency but also pedagogical competence, critical thinking skills, and the ability to reflect on teaching practices. Without a clear understanding of how digital tools support these dimensions, the integration of technology may remain superficial, serving primarily as a communication medium rather than as a tool for fostering deeper and more meaningful learning. Therefore, it is essential to explore how WhatsApp can function not only as a communication platform but also as a medium that supports pedagogical engagement and professional development.

To address this gap, this study investigates the use of WhatsApp in an online TEFL course by examining both the learning activities and the perceptions of EFL pre-service teachers. By analyzing how students participate, interact, and reflect through WhatsApp, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its role in supporting learning within a pedagogical context. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the types of learning activities in which EFL pre-service teachers engage when using WhatsApp, as well as their perceptions of its effectiveness in supporting their learning in an online TEFL course.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to describe EFL pre-service teachers' learning activities and perceptions of using WhatsApp in an online TEFL course. This approach was appropriate as the study aimed to observe the mobile-based learning process and to describe students' perceptions through numerical data.

The participants of this study were 19 sixth-semester students enrolled in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course. They were considered appropriate participants as they were pre-service teachers who were actively engaged in pedagogical content learning and had direct experience using WhatsApp as part of their online learning activities. All participants were involved in the same class.

Observation and a questionnaire were used in this study. Classroom observation was conducted by analyzing WhatsApp chat histories. In addition, a questionnaire consisting of 18 items with three dimensions (ease, learning activities, and benefits) was administered through Google Form to gather students' perceptions. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative interpretation. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed by calculating mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations to identify overall trends in students' perceptions. In addition, qualitative insights from WhatsApp chat observations were analyzed through content analysis to

identify recurring patterns of learning activities. The combination of these analyses enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the observed learning practices and students' experiences in using WhatsApp for online TEFL learning.

3. RESULTS

The results are organized based on the result of observation and the three dimensions of the questionnaire. Table 1. shows the learning activities through the use of WhatsApp in an online TEFL course.

Table 1. Learning activities through the use of WhatsApp in an online TEFL course

Learning Phase	Learning Activity	Description	Learning Purpose
Pre-Activity	Reviewing Learning Materials	Students revisit materials shared before or at the beginning of the lesson through WhatsApp.	To build initial understanding and prepare for learning
	Initiating Questions and Discussions	Students begin asking questions or initiating early discussions before the main session.	To activate prior knowledge and stimulate engagement
Main Activity	Participation in Discussions	Students actively engage in discussions during and after class.	To exchange ideas and construct knowledge
	Sharing Ideas	Students share their perspectives related to pedagogical content.	To support knowledge construction and peer learning
	Responding to Peers	Students respond to classmates' messages or questions.	To maintain interaction and reinforce understanding
	Initiating Questions and Discussions	Students ask questions and initiate discussions during learning.	To encourage active involvement and critical thinking
Post-Activity	Collaborative Group Work	Students participate in group discussions and provide feedback.	To foster collaboration and teamwork
	Reflecting on Learning	Students reflect on what they have learned through WhatsApp discussions.	To promote deeper understanding and self-awareness

Pre-Activity Phase

In the pre-activity phase, students demonstrated initial engagement with the learning process through preparation-oriented activities using WhatsApp. They learnt learning materials shared prior to the lesson, which helped them build foundational understanding of the pedagogical content. In addition, students began initiating questions and early discussions, indicating that they were not merely passive recipients but actively activating their prior

knowledge. This phase reflects a preparatory stage where students showed their readiness for engagement during the learning process.

Main Activity Phase

The main activity phase represented the core of the learning process, characterized by intensive interaction and knowledge construction. Students actively participated in discussions, shared ideas, and responded to peers' messages, demonstrating sustained engagement in collaborative learning. They also initiated questions and discussions, reflecting a shift toward student-centered learning where students took responsibility for driving interaction. Furthermore, students engaged in collaborative group work, including providing feedback and exchanging perspectives, which strengthened peer learning and teamwork. This phase highlights how WhatsApp functioned as an interactive learning space that supported dialogic learning, where knowledge was co-constructed through continuous communication and social interaction.

Post-Activity Phase

In the post-activity phase, students engaged in reflective and consolidative learning practices. They reflected on what they had learned through discussions, which supported deeper understanding and self-awareness of pedagogical concepts. Students also revisited learning materials after the lesson, reinforcing their comprehension and retention of content. Additionally, they continued practicing academic communication by expressing ideas in English, which contributed to both language development and conceptual clarity. This phase illustrates that learning extended beyond the main instructional activities, allowing students to internalize knowledge and refine their understanding through reflection and continued interaction.

Furthermore, in Table 2, it is displayed the data related to the students' perception on the use of WhatsApp. the survey results show that EFL pre-service teachers generally had positive perceptions of the use of WhatsApp in the online TEFL course. As it is presented in Table 2., the mean scores ranged from 3.47 to 4.26. The mean score reflects moderate to high levels of agreement, while standard deviation values ranged from 0.58 to 1.08, which indicates a moderate spread of responses.

Table 2. The students' perception on the use of WhatsApp

Statement	Response (%)					Mean	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
WhatsApp is easy to use for learning activities in the TEFL course.	0	10.5	31.6	36.8	21.1	3.68	0.95
I can quickly understand how to use WhatsApp for course assignments.	0	10.5	42.1	31.6	15.8	3.53	0.90
WhatsApp can be accessed anytime and anywhere for learning.	5.3	5.3	10.5	47.4	31.6	3.95	1.08
The use of WhatsApp aligns with the learning objectives of the TEFL course.	0	5.3	42.1	47.4	5.3	3.53	0.70
WhatsApp helps me participate in discussions about English language learning.	0	0	36.8	42.1	21.1	3.84	0.76

I actively participate in discussions through WhatsApp during or after class.	0	5.3	42.1	36.8	15.8	3.63	0.83
I use WhatsApp to share ideas related to pedagogical content in the TEFL course.	0	5.3	36.8	47.4	10.5	3.63	0.76
I respond to messages or questions from my classmates via WhatsApp.	0	5.3	5.3	63.2	26.3	4.11	0.74
I ask questions or initiate discussions through WhatsApp.	0	0	21.1	63.2	15.8	3.95	0.62
WhatsApp helps me reflect on what I have learned.	0	0	36.8	57.9	5.3	3.68	0.58
I use WhatsApp to review the learning materials after class.	0	5.3	26.3	47.4	21.1	3.84	0.83
I engage in group work (e.g., discussions or giving feedback) through WhatsApp.	0	0	10.5	52.6	36.8	4.26	0.65
The use of WhatsApp helps me better understand pedagogical content in the TEFL course.	0	10.5	36.8	36.8	15.8	3.58	0.90
WhatsApp enhances my interaction with peers and the lecturer.	0	5.3	15.8	68.4	10.5	3.84	0.69
WhatsApp supports collaborative learning in the TEFL course.	0	10.5	26.3	57.9	5.3	3.58	0.77
I feel more confident expressing my ideas through WhatsApp.	0	0	42.1	47.4	10.5	3.68	0.67
WhatsApp helps me practice using English in academic discussions.	0	10.5	31.6	47.4	10.5	3.58	0.84
I gain new insights into teaching practices through learning activities on WhatsApp.	0	5.3	57.9	21.1	15.8	3.47	0.84

Based on Table 2., in the ease and relevance dimension, students viewed WhatsApp as a practical and accessible learning tool. The highest mean score in this dimension was related to accessibility ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.08$), showing that students found it convenient to use anytime and anywhere. WhatsApp was also perceived as helpful in supporting participation in discussions ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.76$) and aligned with course objectives ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.70$). However, understanding how to use WhatsApp for assignments received a slightly lower mean ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.90$).

In the learning activities dimension, the findings demonstrate strong student engagement. The highest mean score across all items was found in group work activities ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.65$), followed by responding to peers' messages ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.74$). Students also reported initiating discussions ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.62$), reviewing materials ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.83$),

and reflecting on their learning ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.58$). These results highlight consistent participation, supported by relatively low variability in several items.

In the benefits dimension, students generally perceived WhatsApp as beneficial for interaction and collaborative learning. Interaction with peers and lecturers was rated relatively high ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.69$), along with increased confidence in expressing ideas ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.67$). Practicing English in academic discussions also showed moderate agreement ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.84$). However, the lowest mean score in the dataset was found in gaining new insights into teaching practices ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.84$). These results suggest that the perceived contribution to deeper pedagogical understanding was more limited.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined how EFL pre-service teachers engage in learning activities and perceive the use of WhatsApp in an online TEFL course. The findings suggest that WhatsApp plays a significant role in fostering active participation and interaction, particularly through peer responses, group discussions, and collaborative exchanges. This supports previous studies which report that mobile messaging platforms enhance student engagement and communication in online environments (Ahmad, 2019; Ayouni et al., 2021; Tang & Hew, 2022). The high level of interaction observed in this study confirms that familiar and accessible tools can reduce participation barriers.

The findings emphasize the importance of social interaction in knowledge construction. Students' engagement in questioning, responding, and sharing ideas reflects a process of co-constructing understanding through dialogue. Similar findings have been reported in previous research, where WhatsApp-mediated discussions were found to support collaborative learning and peer scaffolding (Naghdipour & Manca, 2023; Rambe & Bere, 2013). However, this study extends earlier work by showing that while interaction is frequent, it does not necessarily lead to deeper pedagogical understanding. It is also not showing whether their active participation and its correct answers during the discussion because of their understanding or generative-AI use.

In relation to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, the results reinforce the idea that mobile technologies enable flexible and continuous learning beyond the classroom. Consistent with prior studies, students perceived WhatsApp as easy to use and accessible, which contributed to sustained engagement (Martinez-Comeche & Ruthven, 2021; Motaung & Dube, 2020). The ability to interact asynchronously allowed students to reflect, review materials, and participate at their own pace. However, as also noted in previous research, this flexibility can lead to variations in the depth of engagement, with some students participating more actively than others (Stein et al., 2018). This finding highlights the importance of balancing flexibility with structured learning activities to ensure more equitable participation.

Furthermore, when viewed through the lens of the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge, the study reveals that WhatsApp effectively supports the technological and pedagogical dimensions by facilitating communication and collaboration. This is consistent with earlier studies that highlight the role of digital tools in enhancing interaction (Yao, 2025). However, the relatively moderate perception of its impact on pedagogical understanding echoes previous findings that technology integration does not automatically result in deeper learning (Wu, 2024).

This study contributes to existing literature by providing a more context-specific understanding of WhatsApp use in an online TEFL course. While previous studies have largely focused on general language learning, this study highlights its role in supporting pedagogical

content learning among EFL pre-service teachers. The findings emphasize that although WhatsApp is effective in promoting interaction and collaboration, its potential to support deeper learning without generative-AI intervention requires more intentional and structured pedagogical implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to understanding how WhatsApp supports learning and teaching practices in an online TEFL course by examining both students' learning activities and their perceptions. The findings show that WhatsApp facilitates a range of interactive and collaborative learning activities, including discussion, peer response, idea sharing, and group work. These activities reflect a shift toward more student-centered learning, where pre-service teachers actively engage in constructing knowledge. In addition, students generally perceive WhatsApp as an accessible, relevant, and supportive platform that enhances communication and participation in online learning environments.

However, the study also highlights that while WhatsApp effectively promotes interaction and collaboration, its contribution to deeper pedagogical understanding with the absence of generative-AI support remains limited without structured instructional support. This suggests that the value of WhatsApp lies not only in its technological affordances but also in how it is pedagogically implemented. This study reinforces the importance of aligning technology use with purposeful instructional design. Therefore, integrating structured tasks, reflective activities, and guided discussions is essential to maximize the potential of WhatsApp in fostering meaningful learning in TEFL course.

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