

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no4.5>

## Using WhatsApp in EFL Instruction with Saudi Arabian University Students

**Radhi Alshammari**

School of Education, University of New England  
Armidale, Australia

**Mitchell Parkes**

School of Education, University of New England  
Armidale, Australia

**Rachael Adlington**

School of Education, University of New England  
Armidale, Australia

### Abstract

Messaging tools such as SMS are effective tools for foreign language learning. While many quasi-experimental studies confirm efficacy and positive student attitudes towards these types of tools, little is known about existing teaching practices that utilize messaging tools in tertiary contexts, or the attitudes of students or instructors towards them. This qualitative study investigates the use of WhatsApp, one popular messaging application, in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through examining the attitudes of Preparatory Year students and faculty members at a university in the central-north of Saudi Arabia. Thematic analysis of focus group interviews indicated that WhatsApp is used in EFL instruction for information exchange, language learning support, and language practice. This is achieved through teacher-directed learning, peer learning, and autonomous learning instructional strategies. Thematic analysis also identified the affordances and affective outcomes of using WhatsApp. Student and faculty attitudes towards WhatsApp were positive although some faculty members expressed reservations towards its use. It is argued that applications such as WhatsApp should be leveraged to encourage autonomous and peer learning, repositioning instructors as facilitators, and to develop learning communities. However, increasing the informal, anywhere-anytime learning supported by mobile learning must be tempered with guidelines for students regarding faculty contact hours and response times to allay faculty fears and encourage greater student autonomy.

**Keywords:** application, attitudes, EFL Saudi students, mobile learning, WhatsApp

**Cite as:** Alshammari, R., Parkes, M., & Adlington, R. (2017). Using WhatsApp in EFL Instruction with Saudi Arabian University Students. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (4). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no4.5>

## Introduction

Before the rapid development of mobile technologies and the appearance of mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp Messenger and Snapchat, Short Message Service (SMS) messaging was the primary means to send text-only messages between mobile phones. In education, teachers have used SMS messaging to support student learning through activities such as asking questions, sharing ideas, motivating students, providing feedback on lectures, and sending assignment reminders (Lominé & Buckingham, 2009). For students in higher education, SMS is perhaps the most popular mobile technology because of its ubiquitous nature and two-way communication capabilities (Premadasa & Meegama, 2016). Additionally, since its inception, SMS messaging has given students access to essential information and offered a platform for support groups and collaborative activities.

Rapid improvements in mobile technology have resulted in an increasingly sophisticated number and range of messaging applications. One such application is WhatsApp, a messaging application for smart devices that can be used as an alternative to SMS. WhatsApp is an Internet-based social network tool that provides greater functionality than SMS and allows users to send and receive messages in a variety of media formats: text (that can be longer than SMS text), documents (e.g., PDF), emoji, photos, videos, user locations, and voice or video calls.

In Saudi Arabia, WhatsApp is the most widely used social media tool, eclipsing Facebook, Skype and Snapchat (Al-Shehri, 2014; Fattah, 2015; Fodah & Alajlan, 2015). Due to its popularity, it is not surprising that Saudi Arabian students and their instructors have adopted WhatsApp for various educational uses. To add to the growing literature in this area, this paper explores the use of WhatsApp to support English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in a university in Saudi Arabia.

## Literature Review

### *Effect of SMS Messenger and WhatsApp on English language learning*

In the field of language learning, the use of SMS messaging as a tool for supporting learning elicits positive outcomes (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2009; Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Librero, Ramos, Ranga, Triñona, & Lambert, 2007; Lu, 2008; Saran, Cagiltay, & Seferoglu, 2008). For example, the use of SMS for learning English vocabulary by Asian students proved more effective than using hard copy materials for vocabulary retention and retrieval (Lu, 2008; Zhang, Song & Burston, 2011). Similar results were seen with Iranian EFL learners, for whom reading comprehension was improved through SMS-based English instruction (Motallebzadeh & Ganjali, 2011). Further, this positive effect is not limited to the learning of English, as was demonstrated by Levy and Kennedy (2005; Kennedy & Levy, 2008), who found using SMS to send words, idioms, and example sentences to learners of Italian in English-speaking Australia improved prompt recall and retention.

Associated with the development and availability of smart phones, a growing number of more sophisticated messaging applications have emerged. Not only can these applications do more, but also generally cost less to use than SMS messaging. WhatsApp Messenger is one globally popular example of a social network application with more than one billion users

WhatsApp in over 180 countries (WhatsApp, 2017). In Saudi Arabia, WhatsApp is the most widely used social media tool (Table 1).

Table 1. *Saudi Arabian Social Media Statistics* (Global Media Insight, 2016)

Application	Active users (million)	Percentage
WhatsApp	8.59	27%
Facebook	6.37	20%
Skype	4.45	14%
Snapchat	4.41	13%

WhatsApp is particularly popular because its enhanced capabilities allow users to interact in a variety of ways. For example, WhatsApp allows users to exchange text messages one-to-one or as group conversations. Additionally, users can share documents and a variety of multimedia types as well as making voice or video calls. With this functionality, WhatsApp is a useful learning tool that makes posting, sharing content and engaging in online discussions easy and available anywhere and anytime (Jain, Eddy Luaran, & Rahman, 2016).

For foreign language learning, WhatsApp is a popular and effective means of using mobile messaging (Alsaleem, 2013; Castrillo, Bárcena & Martín Monje, 2014; Lam, 2015; Plana et al., 2013; Taj, Ali, Sipra, & Ahmad, 2017). As is the case for SMS more generally, WhatsApp supports the development of language skills including vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, and writing. In addition, WhatsApp, owing to its novel potential as a collaborative learning medium compared to SMS, improves meaning negotiation (Castrillo et al, 2014); the transferal, sharing and construction of language knowledge (Lam, 2015); and active communication among students and teachers (Jain et al., 2016).

A number of quasi-experimental studies have examined the use of WhatsApp in the Saudi Arabian context, reflecting the popularity of WhatsApp in the region. The use of WhatsApp for English language learning has been shown to improve all aspects of English usage including writing (Alsaleem, 2013; Fattah, 2015); reading (Hazaea & Alzubi, 2016); speaking (Alsaleem, 2013; Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016); and knowledge of vocabulary and word choice (Alsaleem, 2013; Taj et al., 2017); and idioms (Basal, Yilmaz, Tanriverdi, & Sari, 2016).

In a Preparatory Year context, similar to the one that is the focus of the current study, students participating in computer-based and WhatsApp vocabulary learning activities performed significantly better in post-testing than students learning vocabulary in a traditional face-to-face class (Taj et al., 2017). Complementing, Taj et al.'s (2017) quasi-experimental study, and one of few studies of SMS or WhatsApp to include qualitative analysis, Hazaea and Alzubi (2016) found that using WhatsApp improved the reading practices of Preparatory Year students at a University in Saudi Arabia, and perhaps more significantly, increased their reading activity.

To summarize, research studies have demonstrated SMS and in particular WhatsApp, to be an effective tool for English language learning. Students using SMS and WhatsApp outperformed students exposed to traditional means of instruction utilizing face-to-face teaching and/or paper-based learning materials. Improved performance is evident across many aspects of English usage, including writing, speaking, reading, pronunciation and vocabulary.

*Attitudes towards the use of SMS Messenger and WhatsApp in language learning*

One contributing factor to the effectiveness of English language learning through mobile technology is the positive attitudes of students towards this platform. Indeed, many studies report positive attitudes towards the technologies in use alongside improved learning in students. SMS was found to be very effective *and* motivating for Turkish universities and school students for learning English vocabulary (Saran et al., 2008). Similarly, students expressed positive attitudes towards formal, SMS-based learning of vocabulary in Taiwan (Lu, 2008) and Australia (Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Levy & Kennedy, 2005), alongside improvements in language. Further, mobile phones and SMS messaging have the potential to engage and empower the learner, especially in contexts where both formal and informal educational practices occur in parallel (Librero et al., 2007).

WhatsApp in particular has also been positively received by students, who report high levels of satisfaction with language activities that use the application (Plana et al., 2013) and high levels of motivation to participate in activities that exploit WhatsApp's collaborative potential (Castrillo et al., 2014). Importantly, engaging in WhatsApp mediated language activities also has a positive impact on students' confidence, improving their reading habits and willingness to read more in English (Plana, et al., 2013). In the Saudi context, students hold positive attitudes towards mobile devices in supporting English language learning (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016). Nearby, Omani students identified WhatsApp as the most useful application for their informal English learning (Alhadhrami, 2016). In contrast, despite the proven value of WhatsApp and SMS for learning English as part of formal instruction, the Omani students' own attempts at using mobile devices to support language learning was frustrated by a lack of support from their English teachers. Indeed, many teachers either did not allow students to use mobile devices or provided them with limited guidance on how to use mobile device applications (Alhadhrami, 2016).

*Teaching practices using SMS messaging and WhatsApp*

A range of teaching practices incorporating messaging has been examined for their efficacy, using quasi-experimentation and classroom interventions. Many studies have focused on the use of SMS (Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Lu, 2008; Zhang, Song, & Burston, 2011) or WhatsApp (Basal et al., 2016; Taj et al., 2017) to send vocabulary, idioms and sentences to students. Other trialled practices include electronic journaling using WhatsApp to improve writing (Alsalem, 2013).

Complementing this work, collaborative approaches to language learning have also been tested, such as using WhatsApp for group interactions aimed at improving reading comprehension (Hazaea & Alzubi, 2016; Plana et al., 2013); negotiating meaning in collaborative essay writing (Castrillo et al., 2014); and sharing activities, information and ideas in English between students and teachers (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016). Also investigating the collaborative potential of WhatsApp, Lam (2015) explored a blended learning context, showing that students were engaged through transferring, sharing and constructing knowledge with their peers asynchronously and synchronously via WhatsApp.

To summarize, WhatsApp has quickly become ubiquitous amongst university students. In Saudi Arabia particularly, WhatsApp is the most used messenger application in learning both

among university students and for communication between students and their instructors (Fodah & Alajlan, 2015). WhatsApp can facilitate online collaboration and communication, encourage motivation, and improve student performance in foreign language learning.

To date however, research on WhatsApp for language learning has generally adopted a quasi-experimental approach that typically applies WhatsApp as a treatment in formal language learning contexts. Few studies have explored the use of WhatsApp in supporting the informal learning of English, nor documented the current everyday WhatsApp-mediated teaching practices in universities. Further, studies reporting attitudes focus on the attitudes of students arising as a result of interventions, as opposed to student attitudes towards mobile learning more generally. Significantly, studies all but ignore the attitudes of instructors, despite the fact that their negative attitudes can impede students using mobile technology for valuable informal learning (Alhadhrami, 2016).

As a means to address these gaps in the literature, this paper reports upon the use of WhatsApp in learning EFL in a tertiary education context. This is achieved through the presentation and analysis of data as captured through the voices of students and faculty members using WhatsApp at a university in the central-north of Saudi Arabia.

## Method

### *Theoretical framework*

The educational use of mobile devices and applications like SMS messaging and WhatsApp can be considered a form of *informal learning* (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2009). Informal learning defined as ‘anywhere, anytime learning’ typically takes place outside of structured learning programs (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2009). Despite many of the uses of WhatsApp being found to have been initiated by faculty members at the study site, this usage typically took place outside of formalized instruction and so is considered informal learning.

### *Study context*

The study took place at a university at a major urban centre located in the central-north of Saudi Arabia. The university comprises 12 faculties: Education; Sharia and Law; Science; Engineering; Community; Arts; Computer Science; Engineering; Medicine; Applied Medical Science; Dentistry; and Public Health, and provides undergraduate studies across all faculties and postgraduate studies in the faculties of Education and Science. The university has approximately 34,286 students enrolled across the various faculties, all of whom study on campus. As is the practice in all sectors of the Saudi education system, male and female students are segregated, and there are some differences in the curriculum studied by male and female students (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Before studying their chosen disciplines, all beginning undergraduate students at universities in Saudi Arabia must undertake a Preparatory Year (Ministry of Education, 2017; Yushau & Omar, 2007) to help bridge the gap between the public school system and the undergraduate system (Ministry of Education, 2017). As part of their Preparatory Year, students must study the English language. Proficiency in English is considered essential for university students because of greater demands on their English at the tertiary level. To support the teaching

of English, the study site has an English Center that employs 120 faculty members who provide English courses for all first-year students. The entire English program runs for 600 hours and comprises 20 hours per week of instruction across two 15-week semesters.

### *Study participants*

Male students enrolled in English courses in the Preparatory Year and male faculty members from the English Center were invited to take part in a study designed to explore student and faculty attitudes towards the use of mobile devices in the teaching of EFL.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data was collected from both students and faculty members through their attendance at a focus group interview. There were three main purposes for conducting focus group interviews. First, to gather in-depth understandings of students' and faculty members' attitudes about their use of mobile technologies in supporting the learning and teaching of English. Second, to identify current practices with mobile learning. Third, to determine students' and faculty members' perceptions of the enablers and barriers in the use of mobile technologies as an instructional tool. The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured protocol which allowed for the exploration of participant-initiated topics of interest as they emerged in discussion.

Student and faculty members took part in separate focus groups led by the first author. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. The student focus groups were conducted and initially transcribed in Arabic because the students had varying levels of English proficiency. Having an Arabic transcription in the first instance also allowed reference to be made to the original recordings. The student focus group interviews were then translated into English for coding and analysis. A second Arabic translator checked the English-translated transcripts completed by the first author for accuracy. The English language faculty member focus groups were all conducted, recorded and transcribed in English.

As the focus group interviews took place and interview transcripts were prepared and read, a rich story emerged from both students and faculty members of the use of WhatsApp to support the teaching and learning of EFL. Preliminary analysis revealed that WhatsApp was the most mentioned mobile application in the focus group interviews. As a result of both the richness of the data captured in the focus group interviews and the popularity of WhatsApp at the university, thematic analysis was applied to the focus group transcriptions to identify and code the emergent themes associated with the use of WhatsApp. Analysis was undertaken following the six-phase model presented by Braun and Clarke (2006): (a) familiarizing yourself with your data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report.

## **Results**

### *Focus group interviews*

A total of 14 focus groups were conducted. The 49 student participants were divided amongst eight student groups (SFG1–SFG8) with an average of six students per focus group. The 30 faculty members were divided amongst six faculty member focus groups (FFG1–FFG6) with an average of five faculty members per focus group.

*Uses of WhatsApp*

Inspection of student and faculty member transcripts identified three distinct uses of WhatsApp amongst EFL students and English Center faculty members. These were:

- information exchange,
- language learning support, and
- language practice.

These uses of WhatsApp were both student-initiated and faculty member-initiated with interactions via WhatsApp being either one-to-one or as a group.

The first distinct use of WhatsApp was the facilitation of *information exchange* between students and faculty members and between students with each other. There was no mention of faculty members exchanging information with each other via WhatsApp. Typically, information exchange was for course-related information such as due dates and examinations:

*Recently, there has been communication between the teacher and students through creating a group on WhatsApp by the teacher for his students, and they use it to send information, for example our next test reminder, etc. (SFG7)*

The second use of WhatsApp was for *language learning support*. Generally, these interactions happened outside of class hours and were usually in the form of students seeking clarification from the English Center faculty members:

*For example, if there are things I didn't understand after an explanation, I could use my mobile phone because you send or take the photo of a page and send it to the teachers [via WhatsApp] so the teacher can explain, and this simplifies your question quickly or gets the information that you need. (SFG3)*

Similarly, another student said:

*If I search for the meaning of a word in the dictionary and its meaning isn't clear to me, I can ask the teacher for the meaning via the WhatsApp group, and he clarifies the meaning because he can explain it clearer than the dictionary. (SFG8)*

The ability of WhatsApp to support a range of media types was also apparent with students making use of the audio capabilities of WhatsApp to support their language learning:

*If you want to know [a word's] pronunciation, you turn on the microphone and pronounce the word, and the teacher amends it for you, and this way you learn every day. (FFG3)*

The provision of language support was not restricted to faculty members with students using WhatsApp to provide language support for each other:

*It's the students who tend to correct each other [on WhatsApp]. The teacher might do the some of the correcting, but often the students will do as well. It's an organic development for everybody. (FFG5)*

The third use of WhatsApp was in the provision of *language practice*. Such practice took two main forms. First, language practice initiated by faculty members. This type of practice was often centred on an activity and was more formal in its orientation. For example:

*I had a group of students, just last year, we had like a small reading club where I would post a different text for them to read and follow-up questions, and we would have a discussion within the WhatsApp group. (FFG5)*

Another example of a language practice activity was:

*The teacher created a group for us in WhatsApp... and started to give us a new word every day, its pronunciation, its meaning and how to use it in sentences. (SFG1)*

Second, WhatsApp provided students with opportunities for language practice in unplanned, less formal situations such as conversations with faculty members, sometimes with surprising results. One faculty member commented:

*When they [i.e., students] text you using WhatsApp outside the classroom, they are using the language you know in an authentic manner, which is really good, and you would be surprised some of the things that come from students who again, in the classroom, you get the impression that they aren't learning or they are very weak. (FFG5)*

#### *Instructional strategies supported using WhatsApp*

Examination of student and faculty member transcripts identified three main instructional strategies supported using WhatsApp: teacher-directed learning, peer learning, and autonomous learning. The distinguishing feature of these instructional strategies was the location of the locus of control for learning - either with the students or faculty members.

Analysis indicated that most tasks using WhatsApp would be considered as being *teacher-directed* with the locus of control for learning situated with English Center faculty members. Many uses of WhatsApp mentioned previously, such as the reading club task (FFG5) and students being provided with a daily word to learn (SFG3), are examples of activities that were teacher-directed and controlled. *Peer learning* was evident with students correcting their peers' pronunciation and grammar (FFG5). Finally, evidence of WhatsApp supporting *autonomous learning* was apparent with students taking the initiative to identify gaps in their English language understanding and seeking clarification from faculty members and their peers (SFG3, SFG5).

#### *Key themes from thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis of student and faculty member transcripts identified three major themes that comprised 10 sub-themes (Figure 1).

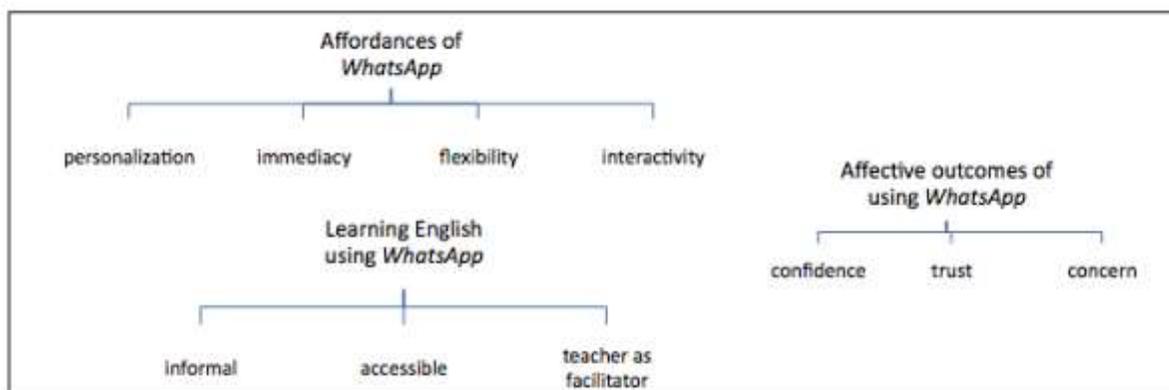


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes

The first theme, *Affordances of WhatsApp*, comprises four sub-themes: personalisation, immediacy, flexibility, and interactivity. This theme captures the ‘affordances’ or built-in potential of WhatsApp when used to support EFL teaching and learning. Faculty members used WhatsApp to help provide students with a personalized learning experience. In one-to-one conversations, students could contact faculty members to rectify gaps in their understanding of the English language.

Supporting the personalized approach, WhatsApp was also able to provide a sense of immediacy to the learning process:

*[If you have a] question or information that you need, to know... it can even be in the mid-year holiday or before a test and you sometimes need to ask the teacher, you can contact him via WhatsApp, and he replies to you. (SFG3)*

However, this sense of immediacy was not without its problems, as will be explored further in the theme *Affective Outcomes of using WhatsApp*.

The flexibility of WhatsApp reflects the flexibility of mobile technology in general. WhatsApp is superior to SMS text messaging because of its ability to handle a range of formats, including text, images, audio and video. Students and faculty members made use of the flexibility of WhatsApp as evidenced by students sending images of pages to faculty members for clarification (SFG3) and faculty members using the audio capability of WhatsApp to check and, when necessary, correct student pronunciation (SFG3).

Similarly, WhatsApp provided opportunities for interactivity. These interactions were either faculty member-initiated or student-initiated and either one-to-one or through WhatsApp groups. Importantly, WhatsApp encouraged interaction from some of the more reluctant students:

*I actually ... some of the students are particularly shy in the classroom, but in the WhatsApp group, somehow it literally ... it frees them to, you know, to make errors,*

*to correct one another, to even laugh at one another's errors without being offended.*  
(FFG5)

The second theme, *Learning English using WhatsApp*, describes the nature of learning that occurs through using WhatsApp and comprises three sub-themes: informal, accessible, and teacher as facilitator. The informal nature of English language learning that emerges when using WhatsApp is due to the way messaging applications serve as student-centred, personal approaches to communication (Horstmanshof, 2004). The informality of the medium helps breakdown some of the formality of classroom-based English language instruction. This can create an outside of classroom environment that is distinctively different:

*Culturally, the class requires a certain decorum from them [students], personal decorum and not just in their language, whereas the WhatsApp group is quite a different personal decorum required or permitted, kind of like creating two completely different social settings.* (FFG5)

Students felt more comfortable when using WhatsApp to communicate as evidenced by the participation of shy students in WhatsApp discussion groups (FFG5). As described earlier, using WhatsApp can shift the locus of control of learning from faculty members to students. WhatsApp encourages this by providing an informal conduit between students and their instructors:

*[WhatsApp] helps support contact between the teacher and the students.* (SFG6)  
WhatsApp also provides an opportunity for connections with fellow students outside of the formal classroom and independent of the instructor:

*There is a communication through contact WhatsApp groups without the teacher, just among the students.* (SFG2)

Two features can characterize the accessible nature of learning English using WhatsApp. First, the anytime-anywhere capabilities of mobile technologies enable users to engage with the learning at times of their own choosing. Applications like WhatsApp allow students to “exploit small amounts of time and space for learning” (Traxler, 2007, p. 8). This is important in a language learning context because “regular practice in short bursts is to be encouraged, whether [students] are on campus or off, and under time pressures or not” (Kennedy & Levy, 2008, p. 316.). Second, English language learning is accessible because mobile technologies are the technologies students engage with every day (Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Mellow, 2005). The popularity of WhatsApp amongst the student body means that it is accessible to a wide range of users:

*WhatsApp, most people have this application.* (SFG5)

WhatsApp is able to support learning based upon the concept of *teacher as facilitator*. The student-initiated interactions with faculty members afforded by WhatsApp acts to shift the locus of control for learning away from faculty members to the students. This shift changes the role of faculty members from instructor to facilitator, answering student-directed enquiries.

The theme, *Affective Outcomes of using WhatsApp*, comprises three sub-themes: confidence, trust and concern. Thematic analysis identified three broad types of feelings associated with the use of WhatsApp for English language learning. First, WhatsApp instilled a sense of confidence in the students. This was evident with students who were reluctant to speak in face-to-face classrooms but felt confident enough to participate in the WhatsApp group discussions (FFG5). Also, during the WhatsApp group discussions, students were confident enough in their English language to skills to be willing to correct their peers' pronunciation and grammar (FFG2).

Some faculty members, however, expressed a lack of confidence in using WhatsApp to support their English language teaching:

*Personally, I would be scared to take on a WhatsApp group. I would think ... well I, I don't know how to go about it. I would need to somebody who had done it to build my confidence to do that. (FFG5)*

Second, the use of WhatsApp also helped engender a sense of trust amongst student and faculty members. For example, students had sufficient trust in their peers to be able to participate in WhatsApp groups and be free of embarrassment if they made an error in their English:

*The WhatsApp group ... it frees them to, you know, to make errors, to correct one another, to even laugh at one another's errors without being offended, and I know they ... that there were, there were no offences taken because we would meet in person again. You could see that there was no animosity or anger between them for laughing at each other within the WhatsApp group. (FFG5)*

Trust was also evident between faculty members and students with some faculty members trusting students with their personal contact details:

*I sometimes give my mobile number to my students as a class, but I also tell them this is for when an emergency.... This is for this purpose, use it for that, and that's fine. And I would say 99% of the time, they respect that. (FFG5)*

Third, the use of WhatsApp caused some feelings of concern, particularly for some faculty members. One major concern was that WhatsApp might be used inappropriately in the classroom:

*Sometimes they [students] use mobile phones for watching videos, and WhatsApp or something like that can distract the students in general. (FFG2)*

Faculty members also expressed concern over the ease WhatsApp could be accessed during class time:

*When a student takes out his phone to use a dictionary, even google some information because smart phones are so quick these days, you can check the dictionary meaning, and then in a second you could check a message on WhatsApp – just slide your finger*

*up on the screen to show you a message – and it would take you two seconds to replay. So, it has to be monitored.* (FFG6)

Some faculty members were also concerned about the ease of access to themselves:

*I think social network applications ... I choose not to use it. I am not a fan because I feel, if you have to have a student example on your WhatsApp, he would be asking you grammatical questions at 10 at night, you see, so with the chat programs, there is no deadline or there is nowhere that you can stop students chatting to you, asking you questions. They can ask you questions at any time.* (FFG6)

Finally, faculty members expressed concern over the conflict that arose when instructed by their supervisors not to use mobile devices or WhatsApp with their students:

*When we met with the Heads of the Department, they emphasized or we emphasized on keeping yourself away from students and not to have relations. So, in such cases, teachers are not encouraged generally to have like WhatsApp groups.... Many times, they told us: “Keep yourself away. Your phone should not be with your students. Just stick to what you do inside the class.”* (FFG5)

## Discussion

Analysis of the transcripts identified three main types of use of WhatsApp in EFL instruction. First, WhatsApp facilitated *information exchange* among students and between students and faculty members. Typically, information exchange was for course-related information and assisted in the management of instruction. Second, WhatsApp provided *language learning support*, with interactions generally happening between students and faculty members outside of class hours and usually in the form of students seeking clarification from the English Center faculty. Particularly evident was the ability of WhatsApp to support a range of media types such as audio in supporting language learning. Third, WhatsApp facilitated in the provision of *language practice*. This language practice took two main forms: language practice initiated by faculty members and language practice initiated amongst students.

Examination of student and faculty member transcripts also identified three main instructional strategies employed in the use of WhatsApp: *teacher-directed learning*, *peer learning* and *autonomous learning*. While teacher-directed learning was the primary instructional strategy of the employment of WhatsApp, peer learning and autonomous learning were also evident. The use of WhatsApp in a teacher-directed manner is not surprising because teacher-directed learning is the main instructional strategy used in Saudi Arabia, particularly in EFL classrooms (Grami, 2012; Tanielian, 2017). However, the informal use of WhatsApp by the students acted to shift the locus of control for learning from the teacher to the student. This allows for greater student autonomy in EFL learning through collaboration with their peers and provides learners with more exposure to the target language in ways that are both engaging and motivating, confirming the findings of previous studies (e.g., Lam., 2015; Lominé & Buckingham, 2009; Lu, 2008; Saran et al., 2008).

Thematic analysis identified three emergent themes from the student and faculty member transcripts. The first theme, *Affordances of WhatsApp*, captured the ‘affordances’ or built-in potential of WhatsApp when used to support EFL teaching and learning. Similar to previous studies in EFL (e.g., Jain et al., 2016), the personalized, immediate, flexible and interactive nature of mobile devices in general and WhatsApp in particular, were identified as being central to the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a tool for EFL instruction. The popularity and widespread use of WhatsApp in Saudi Arabia is what helps make WhatsApp a very powerful learning tool; one in which its identified affordances can be realized and utilized within EFL contexts.

The second theme, *Learning English using WhatsApp*, described the informal nature of the learning arising through using WhatsApp. It also cast the role of the faculty members responsible for the delivery of English language learning in a different light as facilitators. Although analysis showed that many of the interactions taking place using WhatsApp were teacher-directed, this type of learning was still considered informal as it took place outside of structured learning programs, meeting the criterion for informal learning outlined by Cavus and Ibrahim (2009). Faculty members who recognized the affordances of WhatsApp used this mobile application informally to support their formal teaching programs.

The third theme, *Affective Outcomes of using WhatsApp*, encapsulated the broad types of feelings associated with the use of WhatsApp for English language learning. Both positive and negative feelings were identified. At a positive level, the use of WhatsApp engendered a greater level of student confidence in their English language learning, mirroring the attitudes of students towards WhatsApp-mediated formal learning interventions (Plana et al., 2013). The use of WhatsApp was also associated with levels of trust amongst students themselves and with faculty members. However, faculty members expressed concerns over the use of WhatsApp, confirming student perceptions of teachers’ attitudes revealed by Alhadhrami (2016). One concern was the inappropriate use of WhatsApp in the classroom particularly because mobile devices and applications are currently not officially sanctioned for use at the study site. The second concern expressed by faculty members was that WhatsApp made them more accessible to students, especially after hours. In such, a situation the anywhere-anytime affordances of mobile devices in general are seen more as a liability than an asset.

## Conclusion

Confirming the findings of previous literature, WhatsApp continues to be a popular and effective mobile application in the support foreign language learning. This paper adds to the literature on the use of WhatsApp in EFL contexts by analysing the words of students and faculty members about their current WhatsApp-mediated teaching practices for English language learning at a university in Saudi Arabia. It provides further insight into how WhatsApp is used in English language learning, the learning approaches its use encourages, and the feelings it evokes in its users.

Five practical recommendations can be made from the results of this study. First, mobile applications such as WhatsApp allow instructors to take on a greater facilitation role in their teaching. Instructors should embrace such a change because this can lead to their students being more engaged and motivated (Lam, 2015; Saran et al., 2008), and empowered (Librero et al.,

2007). Second, instructors should encourage and provide greater opportunities for autonomous and peer learning. Shifting the locus of control of learning to the students can help avoid an over-reliance on instructors by their students that may arise because of the increased accessibility to instructors brought about by messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Third, as a result of this increased accessibility, instructors need to set parameters around their contact hours. Students need to be informed both of the times when it is appropriate to contact their instructors and the appropriate amount of time in which to expect a response. Fourth, the informal anytime-anywhere learning that can be supported by mobile applications such as WhatsApp should be encouraged, particularly for foreign language learning. These types of informal learning opportunities provide increased opportunities for practice and exposure to the target language, which has been shown to lead to positive learning outcomes (Lu, 2008). Finally, instructors should work to build a learning community amongst their students and themselves. This research demonstrates that a number of the key building blocks required for learning communities to form (sense of identity, common purpose, and trust) are evident in the use of WhatsApp. Instructors can leverage this to take advantage of the benefits of learning communities such as, fostering student engagement, and building and sustaining productive learning (Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2011; Shea, Li, Swan & Pickett, 2005).

This study has a number of potential limitations. First, the data represents the perspectives of a cohort of students and their instructors at a single study site. Research should be conducted at a range of study sites to determine the generalizability of the study's results. Second, as is the norm in Saudi Arabia, the university study site is segregated by sex. Accordingly, the study captured the perspectives of only male students and male faculty members. The perspectives of female students and female faculty members should be sought to determine if they are similar to the perspectives of male students and male faculty members.

What might be the best practices to follow when using mobile technology in a learning environment still remains an under-researched area (Premadasa & Meegama, 2016). This paper adds to the literature by exploring the ways in which WhatsApp Messenger can support English as a Foreign Language instruction. Future research might explore further and expand upon the key themes identified in this paper and shed further light on the instructional strategies supported by the use of mobile messaging applications such as WhatsApp.

#### **About the Authors:**

**Radhi Alshammari** is a lecturer in Educational Technology at a university in the central-north of Saudi Arabia. Radhi is currently completing his Ph.D. at the University of New England, Australia. His research area is in the use of m-Learning in the instruction of English as a Foreign Language.

**Mitchell Parkes** is a Senior Lecturer in ICT Education at the School of Education at the University of New England, Australia. Mitchell's research interests include Learning Design; Learning Management Systems; e-learning competencies; information literacy; and Computer Assisted Language Learning.

**Rachael Adlington** is a Lecturer in ICT Education at the School of Education, University of New England. Her research interests include Information and Communication Technologies in

education and the nexus of technology and literacy. Rachael specializes in using Systemic Functional Linguistics to understand emerging online texts.

## References

- Alhadhrami, M. N. (2016). Using mobile phone apps inside and outside the English language classroom by undergraduate students at Sultana Qaboos University: Attitudes, practices and challenges. *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 4(1), 61-74.
- Almekhlafy, A., & Alzubi, A. A. F. (2016). Mobile-mediated communication a tool for language exposure in EFL informal learning settings. *Arab World English Journal*, 7(1), 388-407.
- Alsaleem, B. I. A. (2013). The effect of “WhatsApp” electronic dialogue journaling on improving writing vocabulary word choice and voice of EFL undergraduate Saudi students. *Arab World English Journal*, 4(3), 213-225.
- Al-Shehri, S. (2014). Mobile learning in the Arab world: Contemporary and future implications. In X. Xu (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary mobile media and communications: Social, political, and economic implications* (pp. 48-62). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-4666-6166-0.ch003
- Basal, A., Yilmaz, S., Tanriverdi, A., & Sari, L. (2016). Effectiveness of mobile applications in vocabulary teaching. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 7(1), 47-59.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Castrillo, M. D. Bárcena, E., & Martín Monje, E. (2014). New forms of negotiating meaning on the move: The use of mobile-based chatting for foreign language distance learning. *IADIS International Journal on WWW/Internet*, 12(2), 51-67.
- Cavus, N., & Ibrahim, D. (2009). m-Learning: An experiment in using SMS to support learning new English language words. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 40(1), 78-91.
- Fattah, S. F. E. S. A. (2015). The effectiveness of using WhatsApp messenger as one of mobile learning techniques to develop students’ writing skills. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(32), 115-127.
- Fodah, O., & Alajlan, H. (2015, March). *A work in progress survey on mobile learning in higher education in Saudi Arabia*. Paper presented at the Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2015, Las Vegas, NV, United States. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/150215>
- Global Media Insight. (2016). Saudi Arabia social media statistics 2016. <http://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics/>
- Grami, G. M. (2012). Are learner-centered approaches the answer to Saudi language classes? *Annual Review of Education, Communication, and Language Sciences*, 9, 1-14.
- Hazaea, A. N., & Alzubi, A. A. (2016). The effectiveness of using mobile on EFL learners’ reading practices in Najran University. *English Language Teaching*, 9(5), 8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n5p8>
- Horstmanshof, L. (2004, December). Using SMS as a way of providing connection and community for first year students. In *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference* (pp. 423-427). Perth, Western Australia, Australia: Australasian

- Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20621-9\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20621-9_15)
- Jain, J., Eddy Luaran, J., & Rahman, N. A. (2016). Learning beyond the walls: The role of WhatsApp groups. In E. J. Luaran, J. Sardi, A. Aziz, & A. N. Alias (Eds.), *Envisioning the future of online learning: Selected papers from the International Conference on e-Learning 2015* (pp. 447-457). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Kennedy, C., & Levy, M. (2008). L'italiano al telefonino: Using SMS to support beginners' language learning. *ReCALL*, 20(03), 315-330.
- Lam, J. (2015). Collaborative learning using social media tools in a blended learning course. In K. S. S. Cheung, L.-f. Kwok, H. Yang, J. Fong, & R. Kwan (Eds.), *Hybrid learning: Innovation in educational practices: 8th International Conference, ICHL 2015, Wuhan, China, July 27-29, 2015, Proceedings* (pp. 187-198). China: Springer International Publishing.
- Levy, M., & Kennedy, C. (2005) Learning Italian via mobile SMS. In A. Kukulska-Hulme & J. Traxler (Eds.), *Mobile learning: A handbook for educators and trainers* (pp. 76-83). London, England: Taylor & Francis.
- Librero, F., Ramos, A. J., Ranga, A. I., Triñona, J., & Lambert, D. (2007). Uses of the cell phone for education in the Philippines and Mongolia. *Distance Education*, 28(2), 231-244.
- Lominé, L. L., & Buckingham, C. (2009). M-Learning: Texting (SMS) as a teaching and learning tool in higher arts education. *European League of Institutes of the Arts Teachers' Academy*, 1-6
- Lu, M. (2008). Effectiveness of vocabulary learning via mobile phone. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 24(6), 515-525.
- Mellow, P. (2005). *The media generation: Maximise learning by getting mobile*. Paper presented at the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (Ascilite) Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.  
<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane05/proceedings.shtml>.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). <https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/pages/default.aspx>
- Motallebzadeh, K., & Ganjali, R. (2011). SMS: Tool for L2 vocabulary retention and reading comprehension ability. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(5), 1111-1115.
- Pike, G. R., Kuh, G. D., & McCormick, A. C. (2011). An investigation of the contingent relationships between learning community participation and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 52(3), 300-322.
- Plana, M. G. C., Escofet, M. I. G., Figueras, I. T., Gimeno, A., Appel, C., & Hopkins, J. (2013). Improving learners' reading skills through instant short messages: A sample study using WhatsApp. In *Proceeding of WorldCall 2013-Call: Sustainability and Computer-Assisted Language Learning* (pp. 80-84). Glasgow, UK: University of Ulster.
- Premadasa, H. S., & Meegama, R. G. N. (2016). Two-way text messaging: an interactive mobile learning environment in higher education. *Research in Learning Technology*, 24(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.3402/rlt.v24.31818>
- Saran, M., Cagiltay, K., & Seferoglu, G. (2008). Use of mobile phones in language learning: Developing effective instructional materials. In *Wireless, Mobile, and Ubiquitous Technology in Education, 2008. WMUTE 2008. Fifth IEEE International Conference on* (pp. 39-43). Beijing, China: IEEE.

- Shea, P., Li, C. S., Swan, K., & Pickett, A. (2005). Developing learning community in online asynchronous college courses: The role of teaching presence. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 9(4), 59-82.
- Taj, I. H., Ali, F., Sipra, M. A., & Ahmad, W. (2017). Effect of technology enhanced language learning on vocabulary acquisition of EFL learners. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(3), 262-272.
- Tanielian, A. R. (2017). Foreign language anxiety among first-year Saudi university students. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 16(2), 116-130.
- Traxler, J. (2007). Defining, Discussing, and Evaluating Mobile Learning: The Moving Finger Writes and Having Writ... *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(2), 1-12.
- WhatsApp. (2017). <https://www.whatsapp.com/>
- Yushau, B., & Omar, M. H. (2007). Preparatory year program courses as predictors of first calculus course grade. *Mathematics and Computer Education*, 41(2), 92-108.
- Zhang, H., Song, W., & Burston, J. (2011). Reexamining the effectiveness of vocabulary learning via mobile phones. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 10(3), 203-214.