

Mobile-Mediated Communication a Tool for Language Exposure in EFL Informal Learning Settings

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of WhatsApp, a widely used application in cell phones, in providing EFL learners with appropriate learning settings to use English language freely and effectively. To achieve the goal of the study, the researchers chose four native speakers of English and forty students from Preparatory Year, Najran University, Saudi Arabia to share a series of activities, ideas and information via a mobile application namely WhatsApp. Various methods associated with social science research were used at different stages of the study. These methods were triangulated to make the study more reliable and result-oriented. First, the postings and comments of the participants were analyzed and studied using Content Analysis. Then a questionnaire of 15 items was administered amongst the participants targeting their attitudes towards the use of MMC in English Language Education (ELE). Finally, a semi-structured interview was used with 10 participants and the native speakers. Based on the results, EFL learners enjoyed more exposure to the language via WhatsApp, where they could communicate with native speakers and interact appropriately. In addition, the questionnaire and the interviews showed positive attitudes towards using mobile in reinforcing language learning. The researchers provide recommendations and suggestions for future research .*Keywords:* language exposure, mobile-assisted language learning, mobile learning, whatsapp

Cite as: Almekhlafy, S. S. A., & Alzubi, A. A. F. (2017). Mobile-Mediated Communication a Tool for Language Exposure in EFL Informal Learning Settings. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1). DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol7no1.23>

1. Introduction

One of the problems that face learners in EFL contexts, such as the Arab World, is the lack of an appropriate exposure to use English language effectively. There is almost no or little exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Traditional classrooms are the only settings where learners receive and learn English. In addition, whatever is taught inside the classroom does not get reinforced outside the classroom. In such a context, most of learners have minimal need to speak English on a daily basis, so English is instructed as a foreign language (EFL) and learning happens without immediate opportunities to use English for actual communication functions (Lan, 2007; Liton, 2012; Moskovsky & Alrabai, 2009). Moreover, teachers often continue to use outdated lecture/ memorization methodologies. This environment rarely includes meaningful interaction with native speakers of English or authentic materials that relate to the target language (Marek & Wu, V. 2007; Su, 2008; Yon, 2003) which may result in lower proficiency. It is, therefore, gainful to EFL learners if exposed to authentic experiences related to the target language especially conversation with native speakers (Fujii & Mackey, 2009; Gilmore, 2007). Thus, providing a good English language interaction, which is feasible with mobile-mediated communication (MMC), can help learners and educators to compensate the lack in their disadvantaged context. WhatsApp can be used to bridge the gap between the need of EFL learners for more language exposure to interact with native speakers for successful language learning and the geographical distance of EFL settings. In the Saudi context, there are very limited attempts to investigate the role of mobile social networks in having a virtual society for language exposure (Amry, 2014; Alsaleem, 2013; Alshehri, 2011; Mahdi & Elnaim, 2012). In accordance, this study adapted a conceptual framework of language exposure in an EFL context to examine the role of using mobile social networks, WhatsApp, outside classroom on students at Preparatory Year in Najran University, Saudi Arabia. The study tries to answer the following questions: *to what extent, can the MMC (WhatsApp) provide EFL learners with an exposure to English language? And what are the participants' attitudes towards the use of MMC in Learning English?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Exposure to Language

Various rudiments affect the learning of language. One of them is exposure to the language itself. Learners with more exposure to the target language are expected to acquire greater familiarity with the target language (TL). Language exposure is, therefore, essential to language learning and the type and level of language proficiency that stems from the language learning process is almost entirely determined by language exposure (Kasper, 1997; Larsari, 2011; Lubega, 1979; Morford, 2003). Likewise, a major point of agreement among most theories of language acquisition is the need for exposure before language can be acquired, and insufficient access to TL certainly is an obstacle to foster EFL learners' language proficiency (MacLeod, & Larsson, 2011). These learners generally do not have passable access to the TL outside the classroom. They return to the real world speaking their mother tongue as soon as they leave classroom (Campbell, 2004). Thus, it becomes an urgent need to increase exposure and use of English language in such context.

There are many forms of exposure to English language. One of them is authentic interactions in English language (Ajileye, 1998; Lightbown and Spada, 2013; MacLeod, & Larsson, 2011). Lightbown and Spada, (2013) crystalize the concept of language

exposure as an informal setting in which language is delivered naturally, i.e., on the job or in the streets, through informal conversations and interactions with native speakers of the TL. In fact, to engage learners in authentic social interactions does not only expose learners to English language but also enables them to practice what they have learned in the classroom (Blake, 2000; Campbell, 2004; Leh, 1999; Spada, and Lightbown, 1999). The learners can also have more opportunities to take part in the authentic interaction and use language effectively.

2.2 *MMC as a Learning Setting*

In connection, mobile can mediate and create informal learning settings for language exposure. With the rapid advances of technology, the learning settings of English language learning are developing. They are no more confined to traditional learning settings (Chen, 2007). The propagation of technological devices such as mobile technology and social networking, particularly, have the potential to establish the change in the learning settings of English that go beyond the classroom. Many researches on mobile learning emphasize the effectiveness of mobile technology in creating contextually meaningful and authentic learning settings (Alshehri, 2011; Gasmi, 2014; Hung & Yuen, 2010; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2007; Mar Gutierrez-Colon Plana, 2013; Ngaleka, & Uys, 2013; Susilo, 2014).

Previous research on the use of mobile social networks in providing EFL learners with informal learning settings for language exposure has received very little attention in the Saudi context. Amry, (2014) claims that WhatsApp provides better learning settings that are favoured on traditional classroom settings. Al-Shehri, (2011) gives students the opportunity to create and build their own learning material. Similarly, Mahdi & Elnaim, (2012) examine the informal use of Facebook on students' interactions. Alsaleem, (2013) implements WhatsApp to improve writing vocabulary word choice and voice of EFL learners.

MMC can help students to express themselves, communicate, and collect profiles that highlight their talents and experience (Ewur, 2014; Plana, Escofet, Figueras, Gimeno Appel, & Hopkins, 2013; Rambe & Bere, 2013). Recently, it is used in academic settings to promote student engagement and facilitate better student learning (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014; Kabilan & Abidin, 2010; Mahdi & Elnaim, 2012; Susilo, 2014). This advantage can be exploited in EFL context where the need for a learning setting outside the traditional one is desirable.

2.3 *WhatsApp as an Effective Tool*

WhatsApp as a mobile communication social network, if exploited in learning appropriately, could benefit both learners and educators (Abulela & Walter, 2013; Barhouni, 2015; Kajornboon, 2013; Wildner, 2005). Since this application is a social platform for communication and interaction, it has captured the interest of many researchers in English Language Education (ELE) because of its plethora features (Castrillo, Martín-Monje, & Bárcena, 2014). Bouhnik & Deshen, (2014) summarize some of these features to technical, educational and academic ones. The technical characteristics are simple operation, low costs, availability and immediacy. The educational ones are creation of a pleasant environment and in-depth acquaintance with fellow students, which have a positive influence upon the manner of conversation. The academic ones are the accessibility of learning materials, teacher availability, and the continuation of learning beyond class hours. These advantages underline the appropriateness of such app to be exploited in EFL context. The creation of a pleasant

environment and continuation of learning beyond class hours are most needed in EFL context such as the Arab World.

However, some researchers highlight the negative side of WhatsApp, they finally conclude that if WhatsApp used carefully results could create an appropriate context for learners to communicate effectively in the target language (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). Furthermore, this application enables learners to interact with a large number of people anytime anywhere (Al Jarf, 2004; Anderson, 2005; Kolb, 2008; Torii-Williams, 2004). It provides a potential channel for interaction among people who speak different languages, live in different countries, and reside in different cultures; however, educators must be willing to take advantage of WhatsApp to use such interaction as a learning tool (Chipunza, 2012; Rambe & Webb, 2013; Susilo, 2014; Wu & Marek, 2011).

To sum up, the above review of literature has been undertaken to show the importance of English language exposure to language learning, and how mobile devices and applications, particularly WhatsApp, are being used to support English language learning by providing an informal authentic and meaningful learning setting. Therefore, language exposure within mobile-mediated communication can be operationalized in this study as the ways students use mobile social networks, WhatsApp, to practice and use the language in a natural way through having conversations and interactions with native speakers outside classroom regardless time and place barriers in an on-going virtual society.

3. Methodology

Seeking a more comprehensive research, the study implemented empirically a triadic research tool: WhatsApp group observation, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. While the observation was after the answers for question 1, 'To what extent, can MMC (WhatsApp) provide EFL learners with exposure to English language?', the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were busy digging deep for 'What are the participants' attitudes towards the use of MMC in learning English?' After that, the data were collected and analyzed for the teacher-researcher to decide on future actions (Harmer, 1991).

3.1 Participants

40 undergraduate students enrolled in Preparatory Year Deanship in Najran University participated in this research. The sample was homogeneous in terms of majors because all students are required to pass the preparatory year in which they are supposed to study English, math, computer, and communication skills, before they are specialized in medicine, engineering, computer sciences, and business management. There were 40 males with an average age of 19 years. All participants are male as Saudi Arabia does not support coeducation in its educational system. Moreover, 4 native speakers from Britain, America, and South African participated in the research. Based on the results of the diagnostic test conducted at the beginning of the first semester, their level of English can be categorized as intermediate. The students, who participated, were chosen based on their voluntary desire and familiarity with mobile communication networks such as WhatsApp in the study. They were oriented about the nature and purposes of the study, so they agreed to take the experiment as they expressed that it would be a great benefit to learn English language. All students are experienced in using mobile social

networks. They have access to the internet mostly anywhere anytime. Data were collected via three instruments: WhatsApp group observation, a questionnaire, and an interview.

3.2 WhatsApp Group

A group of 40 students and 4 native speakers was created on WhatsApp, titled '*PYP English Community*'. Some guidelines and instructions were delivered for the medium of communication, topics, flow of conversations, etc. WhatsApp messenger is a cross-platform instant messaging application for smartphones. In addition to text messaging, users can send each other images, video, and audio media messages (Castrillo, et al. 2014). WhatsApp continues to grow in popularity, with the revelation that its user base has crossed 900-million members. A big reason for the popularity of such an application is that it allows users to text, call, share pictures and videos to each other without paying any fees. Furthermore, Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, (2008) highlight that mobile blogs could facilitate the communication and interaction among students in almost any language setting, and learners had the chance to communicate authentically with the native speakers of the language.

The chat sessions can be done in a one-on-one conversation as well as in a group conversation, in which users can talk to up to 100 members at the same time. To stay in touch via the WhatsApp application, people need each other's numbers and must have downloaded the application on their smart phones. Other advantages for choosing WhatsApp are that; members can communicate synchronously or asynchronously, and they all receive notifications for each activity done in the group. The postings by either the natives or students vary; no topic restrictions were there except those against religion and culture. The participants' postings and comments were observed and analyzed qualitatively in depth, tracing the amount of exposure of language aspects, thus resulting in the students' developments and improvements. The participants and teacher interactions on a topic for one day are considered one segment for the data analysis. A coding system for a native speaker participation (WND-1), for example, and for a student participation (WSD-1), for example, are used; where WND stands for the abbreviated form of WhatsApp Native Day and WSD for WhatsApp Student Day.

3.3 Questionnaire

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was administered to the participants by the end of the period limited for the WhatsApp group interaction. The questionnaire sought to read the participants' attitudes towards the use of mobile social networks for English language learning (ELL). The questionnaire included 15 items to deal with the students' attitudes towards using WhatsApp for language Learning; advantages, disadvantages, and capabilities of mobile in learning. Other items targeted the participants' confidence, motivation and anxiety.

3.4 Semi- structured Interview

An interview, which was prepared by the researchers and reviewed by two experts of English: Dr. Hawuas and Dr. Yaqoub, English language professors at Najran University, was conducted at the end of the semester with ten participants who were chosen randomly out of the 40 participants. The semi-structured interviews were meant to dig deeper in the participants' attitudes using WhatsApp for the language learning purposes. They were to probe what they liked and disliked when participated, aspects of language improvement, and issues of difficulties and enjoyment. Another semi-structured interview was conducted with the participating native

speakers of English to inspect the conductivity of mobile to learning, students' interaction in comparison with traditional classrooms, capability of mobile to improve language skills, and how much enough effective in learning it is.

3.5 Procedures for Data Analysis

The student-participants' answers to the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed using SPSS. The frequencies, percentages and means of each item were the target of the analysis. The number of participants, postings and comments were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively based on Content Analysis Approach (CAA). Later, the results of the analysis were compared and thoroughly discussed. Ten student-participants were interviewed after the WhatsApp group was done that was analyzed qualitatively.

Content analysis is used to reveal the improvement of communicative skills in this empirical study through analyzing the product of the mobile WhatsApp by the participants quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the analysis started with words, topic frequencies, space, measurement, time counts and key word frequencies. In other words, the large amounts of data were reduced into smaller groups of information for a more general view. However, this analysis could be extended beyond figures and frequencies. Qualitatively, building up frequencies and percentages could lead to make inferences the study is set for just right from the beginning when the questions of the study were stated (Weber, 1990; Holsti, 1969).

4. Data Analysis

The participants-students' participations, questionnaire sections and semi-structured interviews were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively to answer the main questions of the study.

The data analysis in the table below provides a quantitative answer for the first research question 'To what extent, can MMC (WhatsApp) provide EFL learners with exposure to English language?'

Table 1. *Student-participants, postings, comments and words*

Group	Participants		Postings		Comments		Words	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
40	34	85	96	3	2460	26	20.000	8

Table 1 summarizes statistically the total participation of the WhatsApp group. 34 students out of 40 participated actively, which comprises a big fraction (85 %) that is positively reflected in the postings and comments of the participants. During the four months, 96 postings were added by the participants with a percentage of 3 % per student. The participants contributed 2460 comments with average of 26% for each posting in connection with participants. It can be generalized that the participation represented in the postings and comments as well as the number of the words, is successful to some degree and shows that students' interaction is plausible.

These results of exposure are very expected as all of the students had smart phones, free internet access on the campus, free charge WhatsApp application, and were free in time, place, topic, and technology engagement. In addition, students needed to keep in touch with teachers

and college affairs. Four native speakers participated in the group. Moreover, the participation is a non-grade course, so students were pushed to express themselves and communicate neglecting the idea of committing mistakes.

As for the qualitative answer, the whole participation of the students' postings and comments was scanned and analyzed thoroughly for the impact of informal use of MMC in producing a virtual language exposure platform in a larger outside classroom environment. In connection with the answer for question number one, the observation was in two perspectives. As for the first side, it can be noticed that participants interacted and shared materials from their surrounding context (*university affairs, football sports events, areas, weather, war, social affairs, plans for vacation, nature, areas, religion affairs, etc.*). They posted pictures and videos on mountains, green plains, heavy rains, fog, mist, and sand storms. Thanks to mass media, that establishes the ground for any topic. As a result, students could have more information about any news, which in turn gave them a chance to interact in the group actively and independently. The data analysis shows that participants were free to express and suggest what they want as evident in the following:

- WSD-1: *What about 5 words everyday or more than 5*
- WSD-1: *Absolutely difficult words*
- WSD-1: *It's an excellent idea*
- WSD-1: *Dr ..ali .. I think the best to learning English it's leasing a lot of audios and videos it's very helpful*
- WSD-1: *Listing **

It is also revealed that although students were instructed that English is the only medium of communication, some typed in Arabic, which was totally refused by all of the participants and expressed their need for English for many reasons as clearly shown:

- WSD-2: *because we need it in our live*
- WSD-2: *I'm sorry*
- WND-2: *The objective of the group is to practice more and more English.*
- WSD-2: *You want to speak Arabic you didn't get bored because always you speak Arabic try to change*
- WSD-1: *I know we can't leave our mother tongue but we have to go with all people in the world.*

In addition, it is found that embodied self- correction ways were present in the following example:

- WSD-60: *Just keap your down*
- WND-60: *Keep* what down?*
- WSD-60: *Head **

Moreover, it was also noticed that the discussion and comments increased before and during the mid- term exams and final exams. They were sharing and asking for answers for some points from the participating teachers. The following conversation is evident for that:

- WSD-45: *Are you talking about general English, tomorrow's exam?*
- WND-45: *What advice do have for the students, Dr. Sultan?*
- WSD-45: *The exam of GE divided into four parts*

- WSD-45: *Reading and writing parts are not a problem for students*

Participants went over a lot of grammar practice and explanations as shown in the following excerpts:

- WSD-45: *Grammar focuses on some rules*
- WSD-45: *Use of since and for is very clear ... since used only when pointing a time*
- WSD-45: *Same first exam*
- WSD-45: *For example since 1990*
- WSD-45: *But for is used when mentioning period of time*
- WSD-45: *For example for two years*
- WSD-45: *Both of them used with perfect tense*

All of the participants interacted and communicated in English though their mother language is Arabic.

Exposure to the language can be traced in the four skills of English; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As for listening and speaking, the data analysis shows that *participants listened to audios and videos posted by their peers on various topics (Islam religion, politics, academic, songs, debates, language pronunciations, etc.). Some of them added voice notes in reply to some questions or discussion.* For example, students had a talk about how to differentiate between American English and British English supported by instances as the following:

- WSD-12: *I like british pronounce*
- WND-1: *'Wa'der' is an Americanism. □. Reduced pronunciation of 'wa.ter'. 'Street' language, in my view!*
- WND-1: *Use your dictionaries, folks! I mean, a decent dictionary with pronunciation.*
- WSD-1: *t pronounced d in American pronunciation*

It is revealed that the reading skill had enough shares of learning in almost all of its aspects; summarizing, vocabulary, context-based meaning, spelling, appropriate use of vocabulary, and making irony of words as evidently explained in the following examples: Students were posted a short story and asked to summarize the moral in a few lines, which is clear in the example:

- WSD-17: *When he was about eight or nine, his mom liked to cook food. He love burned toast. His father said, your momma put in a very long day at work today and she was very tired. Life is short to wake up with regrets. Love the people who treat you right and have compassion for the ones who don't.*
- *Enjoy life now.*

In addition, one student asked about the difference between 'house' and 'home', and how he can use them appropriately as showed in the following:

- WSD-21: *What is the different between a house and home ?*
- WND-21: *House refers to structure and concrete materials.*
- WND-21: *Home refers to emotions and memories*
- WND-21: *With examples.*
- WSD-21: *I feel at home in my office*

- WSD-21: *Home sweet home.*

Moreover, a participant posted the abbreviated form of 'KISS' and others guessed the meaning in the context:

- WND-31: *'KISS'. Keep it short and simple. Why complicate matters with a 'long winded' sentence?*

- WND-31: *This is their job to break down complicated sentences rather than to compose.*

Furthermore, a participant mentioned the word 'dear' critically in a sentence, a native speaker explained to him where this word can be best used:

- WND-16: *It is not usual to address someone as 'dear'. Unless you're his grandmother, mother or someone like that.*

The analysis shows that participants tried to modify and to twist the language, so it can fit their culture with a lot of fun while they were talking about the current bad weather:

- WSD-32: *Have a nice dusty day people*

- WSD-33: *The weather like eggs*

- WSD-33: *Eggs!!*

- WSD-33: *Mean bad*

Concerning about the writing skill, the data analysis shows that students were exposed to a very big and large content either by them or their groupmates, which was carefully considered. They tried their best to write a cohesive and coherent text. In other words, they were concerned about their good product in terms of *grammar, spelling, word order, punctuations, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, etc.* However, the content of the postings and comments of the students revealed a number of critical issues with regard to the final product of the language.

Firstly, the prevailed phenomenon in mobile social networks of using shortenings was present in this following example:

- WSD-61: *Thnx for this info.*

- WSD-61: *OMG*

Secondly, participants tried their best to avoid any grammatical and/ or spelling mistakes, as mistake correction by teacher was available, thus having very little cases as evident in this conversation:

- WND-13: *Why use 'already' and 'before' in the same breathe? You have 'already seen it', 'seen it already' or 'seen it before'.*

- WSD-13: *May be we Arabs like to emphasize. hahahahahaha*

Thirdly, participants did not care about the use of unimportant punctuation, in their views, except for capital letters and question marks, which was used most of the time as clear in this example:

- WSD-14: *Are u going somewhere?*

- WSD-14: *Or u will stay in Najran?*

- WSD-14: *What about homework?*

Fourthly, some students used smilies and other shapes as they felt they are more expressive to convey the message, and it can be said it is a way to avoid spelling mistakes e.g. students used the picture of a woman facing to express the verb dance in the sentence" *I want to(A pic of*

woman dancing). Another student used *the pic of a man running in the sentence "You(A pic of a man running) guys."*

Fifthly, the use of phrases witnessed a lot occasions as seen in the following excerpts:

- WSD-29: *Fantastic*
- WND-29: *In my pocket*
- WND-29: *A lot of things.*

Sixth, English voice notes were present by very limited number of students to avoid spelling mistakes as they expressed.

It can be summarized that although that students did not use some punctuations, shortenings, abbreviations, and full sentences as much as they cared about conveying the message not because they could not use them, but they felt they are less important since the message is conveyed without them, the punctuations are on a different page of the mobile keypad, which make students neglect them, and to save more time for the next step, especially whenever they felt in a hurry.

In addition, Table 2 below is statistics of the overall of the students' participation per topic in the WhatsApp group.

Table 2. *Students' participation per topic*

The topic	No.of postings	Percentages	No.of comments	Percentages	Comments/ Postings
Academic life	45	47%	1500	61%	33
Social Affairs	20	21%	290	12%	7
Funny videos and pictures	8	8%	81	3%	10
Nature	7	7%	195	8%	28
War	5	5%	100	4%	20
Sports	5	5%	70	3%	14
Advice	4	4%	148	6%	37
Greetings	2	2%	76	3%	38
Total	96	100%	2460	100%	26

Table 2 shows that the variation of topics as there was no restriction on the students' postings within the frame work traditions, cultures and religion. Students could share and post any pictures, videos, and texts. The total number of posting is 96, which somehow comprises a small fraction if compared to the number of comments (2460) and students (34). Academic life, which received the most postings (45) with a percentage of 47% and comments (1500) with a percentage of 61%. This aspect covered many topics such as examinations, courses, classes, vacation, educational links, presence, absence, meetings, etc. The average number of comments for each posting is 33. This high participation may be attributed to the students' interests in the things that may help them on their study. They also shared and interacted on items related to academic life, which are known for all of them. Social affairs came second and had 20 postings and 290 comments which is also a very good percentage in comparison with the next items. They shared and discussed sickness, death, role of mother in life, sleeping habits, etc. The third topic which had 8 postings and 81 comments was funny videos and pictures in form of making irony of some decisions being taken, *e.g. there was a huge dust storm and all schools had their students off except Najran university, a student wrote, 'We have got air filters just like cars,'*

followed by nature with 7 postings and 195 comments. War and sports had the same number of postings, and the comments were 100 and 70 respectively. The rest of the topics had less postings and quite good comments. Advice aspect received 7 postings and 148 comments whereas greetings had 2 postings and 76 comments. These results indicate that even though students are outside classroom, they still prefer to share and discuss topics related to their study. To answer the second question 'What are the participants' attitudes towards the use of MMC in learning English?' the means, standard deviations, and levels of response were extracted from the first part of the questionnaire filled out by students at the end of the study. Moreover, to specify the level of direction, the classification based on the means according to the measurement experts is followed:

- (1---- less than 1.80) Very low
 (1.80---- less than 2.60) Low
 (2.60 ---- less than 3.40) Average
 (3.40 ---- less than 4.20) High
 (4.20-----5.0) Very high

Table 3. *Students' responses*

Items	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level of response
1. Build my confidence in using English.	30	4.60	.621	Very high
2. Reduce my anxiety in learning English.	30	4.40	.621	Very high
3. Increase my motivation in learning English.	30	4.70	.466	Very high
4. Get quick feedback from my teachers.	30	4.23	.858	Very high
5. Allow my mistakes to be corrected at once.	30	4.57	.679	Very high
6. Negotiate meaning using English.	30	4.50	.682	Very high
7. Ask for more information using English.	30	4.60	.563	Very high
8. Clarify meaning using English.	30	4.40	.770	Very high
9. Infer meaning according to the context.	30	4.33	.844	Very high
10. Improve my vocabulary.	30	4.43	.774	Very high
11. Improve my grammar.	30	4.07	.868	Very high
12. Understand the text better.	30	4.43	.626	Very high
13. Express my thought better.	30	4.33	.758	Very high
14. Communicate better in this group than in the classroom.	30	4.27	.907	Very high
15. Participate more in this group than in the classroom.	30	4.03	.928	Very high
Total	30	4.39	.367	Very high

Table 3 shows that the perceptions of students towards using mobile apps, namely WhatsApp, are very high with a mean of (4.39) and a standard deviation (0.367). Item no. 3 (*Increase my motivation in learning English*) received the highest mean (4.70), standard deviation (0.466) and a very high level, whereas items 1 (building my confidence in using English) and 7 (ask for more information using English) came second with a mean of (4.60) and standard deviations (.621) and (.563) respectively. However, items 11 and 15 received the lowest means (4.07) and (4.03) with standard deviations of (.868) and (.928) in a row. Participants felt confident and motivated. They got a chance to correct mistakes and get feedback from teachers.

They had a room to express themselves freely, which resulted in their grammar and vocabulary improvement. Finally, they preferred to participate in this group than in the classroom.

In addition to the above, the students' attitudes were tested through a set of qualitatively analyzed questions in form of semi- structured interviews as follows:

Table 4. *Students' likes*

Q1	Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
What did you like when you participated in this group?	Use of English	12	40 %
	Interaction	6	20%
	Mistake correction	5	17%
	Motivation	3	10%
	everything	3	10%

Table 4 shows that the results of the analysis of the first open question (What did you like when you participated in this group?). Use of English received the highest frequencies (12) with a percentage of 40 % followed by interaction, which had half of the frequencies, and percentage of use of English. While mistake correction got 5 frequencies with a percentage of 17%, motivation and everything were repeated for three times with a percentage of 10%.

Table 5. *Students' dislikes*

Q2	Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
What did you not like when you participated in this group?	Nothing	18	60%
	Use of Arabic	8	27 %
	Lots of chats	6	20%
	Few educational resources	4	13%

It can be inferred from table 5 that 18 students who comprise 60% had nothing to dislike in the WhatsApp group. 8 students denied the act of those students who were typing in Arabic in some situations and their percentage was 27%. Sometimes there were lots of chats on some topics which 6 students did not like. Few educational resources were the last thing that only 4 students did not like with a percentage of 13%.

Table 6. *English improvement*

Q3	Answers	Frequencies	percentages
What aspects of English language learning did you feel improved?	Reading	22	73%
	vocabulary	20	67%
	Writing	16	53%
	Grammar	11	37%
	Listening	3	10%

When students were asked about the skills that they felt improved in, reading was repeated 22 times with a percentage of 73%. Vocabulary improvement came second with 20 frequencies and a percentage of 67%. While writing was repeated 16 times, grammar had 11

frequencies with a percentage of 37%. Finally, listening had the least frequencies with a percentage of 10%.

Table 7. *Students' interests*

Q4	Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
What is the most interesting part of this group?	Interaction	26	87%
	Vocabulary	22	73%
	Mistake correction	15	50%
	Simple chats	13	43%
	Educational resources	7	23%
	Competition	4	13%

Participants were interested mostly in the interaction with each other, which was repeated in their answers for 26 times with a percentage of 87%. While Vocabulary booked their second interest, which had 22 frequencies with a percentage of 73%, simple chats followed it with 15 frequencies and a percentage of 43%. Educational resources and competition came last with frequencies of 7 and 4 and percentages of 23% and 13% respectively.

Table 8. *Students' difficulties*

Q5	Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
What is the most difficult part of this group?	Nothing	16	53%
	Fast chats	6	20%
	New vocabulary	4	13%
	Grammar	4	13%
	Speaking in English	3	10%

Table 8 shows the parts where participants felt a sort of difficulty. 16 students felt no difficulty in any part, which comprises 53%. On the opposite, they said that everything was simple and easy to understand. 6 students with a percentage of 20%, said that fast chats made them lost their focus as it was so difficult to keep up with the discussion in some cases. New vocabulary and grammar received equal frequencies, 4 for each and the percentage was 13%.

Table 9. *Students' participation*

Q6	Answers	Frequencies	Percentages
Have you enjoyed participating in this group? Why?	Yes, English improvement	16	53%
	Yes, existence of high qualified teachers and learners	7	23%
	Yes, free atmosphere	5	17%
	Yes, confidence	4	13%

Table 9 shows the participants' answers on whether they enjoyed taking this experience and why. All of the students without any exception expressed their conveniences and comforts towards participating in this group for many reasons. The majority of the students enjoyed the

group as they sought to improve their English language. 7 students liked the existence of high qualified teachers and learners. In addition, 5 students supported the free atmosphere in the group. Finally, 4 students enjoyed participating as they felt more confident.

Finally, the native speakers, who participated in the group, were interviewed. They both appreciated this initiative and expressed their support to such idea. They also pointed out that the environment is not misleading students rather it can be useful for all levels of English as students learn in any way; *if they share videos, it means they learn listening. If they type in English, they learn writing.* When asked about the replacement of technology for traditional classrooms, they did not agree with the idea. They expressed that, *'The technological interaction via mobile apps is not better than the traditional classes. Rather it can work as supplementary to the traditional classes.'* *'The traditional classes cannot be replaced totally by the technological interactions via apps and programs. Face-to-face classes along with mobile technology integration are still better.'* They do agree that students' skills are improved, *if they are encouraged to express themselves freely.* *'When they type and commit mistakes, it means they are doing mental activities that result in their improvement at the end.'* Moreover, on the question about the efficiency of MMC in teaching and learning English, they replied, *'It depends on the mobile applications how well organized and designed. It also depends on the student's interaction in such apps.'* *'If students like to use this technology, they will be motivated to interact and thus achieve if directed in such a way where organization and achievement is within the context.'* As for their observation on the whole participation, they answered, *'Students are motivated to use the language where they give comments in English which is a positive side.'* *'However, a clear plan and organization is needed in such a way to keep students focused. But all in all I like this promising experience.'*

5. Findings and Discussion

Taking the first question into consideration, 'To what extent, can MMC (WhatsApp) provide EFL learners with exposure to English language?' the analysis revealed that students used and practiced the language effectively through exposure to informal appropriate learning settings of English inside the virtual environment of WhatsApp. In more details, students tried cleverly to adopt what they learnt inside classroom with their outsider surroundings as they are convinced that it would be of a great benefit for best learning outcomes and, more importantly, it fosters and masters their English skills. Moreover, they were given the chance to produce entertaining learning materials without any restrictions and outsider forces.

These results are in agreement with relative findings that call for mobile integration in informal learning settings outside classroom (AL-Shehri, 2011; Alsaleem, 2013; Al-Jarf, 2004; Baghdasaryan, 2010; Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009; Mahdi, & El-Naim, 2012). This is due to the common background of students with regard to education, environment, religion, mentality, and so on. They also extended their in-class learned practices outside, as they felt free in terms of time and place and had no pressure (AL-Shehri, 2011 & Petersen, et al. 2008).

As for 'What are the participants' attitudes towards the use of MMC in learning English?' the analysis of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews showed that the majority of the participants had positive attitudes towards the technologies and agreed that they could help them in learning English. WhatsApp raised their confidence, reduced anxiety in using English, and

they felt more motivated. They also felt improved in meaning inferences, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, pronunciations, spelling, punctuation, and spelling. In addition, they appreciated the WhatsApp group as it can serve for both learning English and fun at the same time. In more details, they mostly liked the experiment as it had them exposed more to use and practice the language as it is expressed clearly in one of the students' interviews, '*I just started learning English*'. These results are in agreement with (Kessler, 2010; Khrisat & Mahmoud; 2013; Lan, Sung & Chang, 2007; Lin & Chen, 2012; Miyazoe, & Anderson, 2010; Osman & Chung, 2010; Wu, Yen, & Marek, 2011; Yamaguchi, 2005).

Tackling the issues of missing punctuations, shortenings, abbreviations, emotions, smilies, and pics, participants importantly cared about conveying the message not because they could not use them, but they felt they are less important since the message is conveyed without them, the punctuations are on a different page of the mobile keypad, which make students neglect them, and to save more time for the next step, especially whenever they felt in a hurry. These phenomena, according to Sharlpes, et al. (2005), are considered a very much habit of any social network community. They state that '*As they become familiar with the technology they invent new ways of interacting – 'smilies', text message short forms, the language of instant messaging – that create new rules and exclusive communities. This appropriation of technology not only leads to new ways of learning and working, it also sets up a tension with existing technologies and practices.*' In relation, Castrillo, Martín-Monje & Bárcena, (2014) the language used in chatting is like a mix of features drawn from prototypically spoken and prototypically written media; however, the trend is towards a more informal, "spoken" style of writing. This is especially obvious at the paralinguistic/graphic level, where additional means have been used to represent effects that are possible in face-to-face interaction but not in writing.

6. Limitations of the Study

We believe that our work could be a further addition to highlight the role of mobile features and apps in English language learning. However, this work clearly has some limitations. It can be said that due to the war circumstances in the southern area of Saudi Arabia, Najran, along the Yamani border, students' interaction in the fourth month since the group was created, was remarkably reduced. Another thing is that although students were directed about the medium of communication that had to be only in English, some cases typing in Arabic happened here and there. More importantly, lack of focus on one topic occasionally occurred. Finally, shyness took place with some students although students did not identify each other inside the group unless they asked.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study mirrors the capabilities of mobile technology, WhatsApp, to share a role of improvement in reinforcing language learning through having students involved in a virtual native English environment, almost for free, regardless time, place, and topic. It tried to shed light on the pedagogical aspects and practices of mobile phones. This study has indicated that collaborative learning embodied in virtual interaction was indeed supported by the use of mobile phones where the students were the center of learning process, and the teacher is facilitator of learning. Students also did communicate positively through chatting, sending pictures and videos, and sharing ideas authentically in relation to what they learn inside classroom, as they needed more exposure to the language in their mother language environment. In other words,

students did exploit what they received in classroom to better practice and use in a closer and more appropriate environment via WhatsApp to reach the ultimate goal of language learning. Another unconsidered result is that students developed a sense of independency in terms of learning choices. Taken together, these findings implicate the role of mobile in creating an appropriate virtual environment, where students get the chance to practice and use the language effectively, following the saying 'Use it or lose it'. However, more planning and centered focus was needed for the ultimate benefits of the students.

As this study investigated the opportunities for language exposure by mobile social networks, it can be suggested that further studies are needed to measure this language exposure. It is also recommended that more studies be done on mobile potentials either to replace or to supplement classroom education.

8. Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express their appreciation and gratitude to Najran University for funding the research by the sixth stage research grant code No. NU/ SHED/14/154

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