WhatsApp Groups in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: The coronavirus pandemic has generated changes in the teaching-learning process in higher education institutions. As a result, most universities have shifted to online, where teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Much attention has been given to second language teaching and learning in higher education. Whether it is language apps, video conferencing tools, virtual tutoring or online learning software, there has been a significant surge in usage since COVID-19. However, learners still have limited opportunities to use the language online and they are not able to stay online for a longer time. Therefore, Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has opened up a gateway for educators and learners to enhance second language teaching and learning by taking it into the real world. This study aims to solve the lack of communicative learning opportunities by introducing WhatsApp groups with MALL. A field observation with 35 students from one English class at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn was conducted to investigate the perception of students towards the use of WhatsApp groups as a motivational tool to develop their English usage. The results suggest that WhatsApp group helps to create language engagement, which effectively motivates the learners further. WhatsApp groups can help to reinforce classroom topics and improve conversations, collaborative work, and even writing. Therefore, WhatsApp groups are promising in English learning for higher institution students.

Keywords: MALL, WhatsApp Application, Language Teaching and Learning

1. Introduction

Numerous studies demonstrate the impact of mobile phones on learning during the COVID-19 epidemic. It has developed into the most versatile and significant communication instrument. People engage and communicate with one another simply and conveniently using mobile phones as social networking tools. Mobile phones have undoubtedly and categorically been shown to be a worldwide phenomenon that has resulted in a significant paradigm change in the teaching and learning fields during the present pandemic. In the current situation, it appears that mobile phones have had a significant influence on our social interactions and structure, as well as on education in general and English

language acquisition in particular. It has been proven that mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has created a realm of the digital environment in today's new-age learning (Nuraeni, 2021).

1.1 Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

Many studies have been conducted to describe the definition and functioning of MALL in education. Ali (2014) describes MALL as language learning using hand-held technology such as mobile phones, PDAs, iPods, iPads, and other similar devices that may influence language acquisition. MALL, according to Valarmathi (2011), is a subset of both Mobile learning (M-learning) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Both demonstrate how the phrase "mobile devices" refers to portable learning tools that can be used by students at anytime and anywhere, extending the learning time and environment beyond traditional classrooms and lecture halls to places like libraries, homes, cafes, shopping centres, hostels, and more (Norazah, Embi, & Melor, 2010; Valarmathi, 2011; Suneetha, 2013). Generally, all of these devices used are connected to the internet and thus helping the user to use them anywhere. This is the most significant feature which allows learners to have lifelong learning that can be obtained by this convergence (Sharples, Taylor & Vavoula, 2005).

MALL is a new channel for learning a language in the world of education. With the utility and importance of English as a second language in Malaysia, the merging challenges of English are on the rise. Even though MALL is a new and emerging way of teaching and learning the English language, it provides innovative methods to teach and learn the language with novelty. The capacity of learners to communicate is the most crucial part of language teaching and learning (Norazah et al., 2010). According to Samsiah and Azidah (2013), employing the notion of accessibility in the classroom can help instructors improve their pedagogical practices. This accessibility idea will also allow language learners to return and reflect on previously learned knowledge to generate new knowledge. Aside from that, learners may guide their learning process because they can access and generate knowledge on their own (Norazah et al., 2010; Suneetha, 2013). Furthermore, due to a need for privacy, students will converse more through their mobile phones (Samsiah et al., 2013). According to Zhang (2003), when students have the privacy to interact among themselves, they would feel comfortable and motivated. Motivation is critical in engaging learners in language acquisition, particularly in motivating them to utilise the language they have acquired. Evidence suggests that ESL learners in Malaysia have a favourable opinion of MALL, with them constantly eager and motivated to study and utilise the targeted language (Ehsan, Ismail & Mustaffa, 2014).

1.2 WhatsApp Application

The WhatsApp application is one of the most current and well-liked social networks that has been utilised in MALL. This application functions as instant messaging for a smartphone. Instant messaging has recently gained popularity as a teaching tool in both schools and institutes of higher learning. According to Telenor Research (2016), 62% of respondents in Malaysia alone ranked mobile applications as the most crucial communication tool on their mobile devices. There is 97% of Malaysians use WhatsApp despite numerous alternative applications for instant messaging such as WeChat, LINE, Telegram, and email, therefore, widely utilised among students, who use it for communication. WhatsApp is a free app that is accessed through a mobile phone and can be connected to other devices such as a computer. WhatsApp makes it simple for people to communicate with one another by allowing them to send and receive messages, images, audio files, and documents (Martina, Hendro & Indra, 2020).

Research by Mistar and Embi (2016) looked at the potential benefits of using WhatsApp as a learning aid for students to improve their language learning. This research includes 20 Kuala Pilah Pre-University students who enrolled in the Program Matrikulasi Dua Tahun (PDT), which is a two-year curriculum programme. In addition to using and speaking Malay as their mother tongue, they typically use and speak English for academic purposes. The information was gathered from a variety of sources,

including the students' attitudes regarding WhatsApp, their perceptions of the app's comfort and simplicity of use, its value, and their behavioural intentions. The findings indicated that WhatsApp was simple to use, simple to understand, quick to exchange knowledge, and aided in discussing material quickly, views for its usage among students were at a high level. The outcomes also demonstrated that WhatsApp's usefulness among students was quite high. The usefulness of this application may increase students' engagement in language activities, confidence in speaking the language, and ability to learn the language more effectively. The survey also discovered a high level of students' behavioural intention in using WhatsApp. The majority of the students had the greatest behavioural intention to continue using WhatsApp for language study in the future. As a result, the study's findings revealed that utilising WhatsApp is important for aiding students in learning the language and improving their skills with it. According to the findings of this study, students and institutions should be encouraged to use WhatsApp, therefore internet access should be prioritised in today's education.

1.3 WhatsApp Groups

WhatsApp group is a platform where all participants are from the same class or course. WhatsApp's special feature is group discussions. They may have their discussions on particular subjects. This group allows members to respond right away and join the chat, which improves communication. Teachers can also engage students' interests by utilising this tool with innovative teaching strategies such as game-based learning. Students can give opinions and ideas to one another using a variety of features in the WhatsApp group. Students can communicate their thoughts by adding photos, sharing videos, sharing web links, recording videos, and doing many other things. Thus, it also encourages students to actively participate in educational activities where teachers are there to monitor.

Although numerous studies on the use of WhatsApp groups have been undertaken, the situation has not reached as wide coverage as the traditional face-to-face learning method, particularly in language learning. Unfortunately, the unprecedented pandemic has made online learning essential for everyone, and the digital and language learning divide appears to be a major concern. Recognizing the above issue and the scarcity of research undertaken in the English teaching and learning setting as a result of the pandemic, the driving concerns of this study are:

1. What are the advantages of the use of WhatsApp groups for language learning?

2. What are the students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp groups as a language learning motivation?

2. Methodology

The descriptive qualitative method was used in this study and the participants were 35 UTHM students from one of the English classes offered. This qualitative research used purposive sampling to obtain the data through observations where the participants were assigned a few language activities through WhatsApp groups. This kind of approach focuses on participants' subjective experiences to gain insight into the particular meanings and behaviours of communication while using WhatsApp for language learning. The following are the steps taken for the experiment to be conducted.

2.1 Creating the Group

The WhatsApp group creation process is the initial stage. How many groups or classes you intended to create will determine this. Even if you do not engage in every chat, make sure you are in all the groups. It is advisable to divide your students into smaller groups for each class you teach if you want to encourage more individual evaluation and enhance the integration of all the students. In smaller groups, it is simpler to assist and monitor their work. You can just allow them to work in pairs or trios and send their answers to the group.

2.2 Rules Setting

It is important to start creating the rules before you even give any activities. To ensure that the students understand exactly what is required of them, go over all the guidelines with them. Similar to how rules are taught in the classroom on the first day of class. The pace of the other activities will be determined by how you deliver the WhatsApp tasks or assignments to the students. Students must understand their responsibilities and how they will be evaluated. Additionally, it is important that you be clear on the criteria that will be used to evaluate student tasks. Figure 1 is the screenshot of the task rules and evaluation criteria that have been introduced. The guidelines and standards must be created in a way that reflects the reality of the classroom.
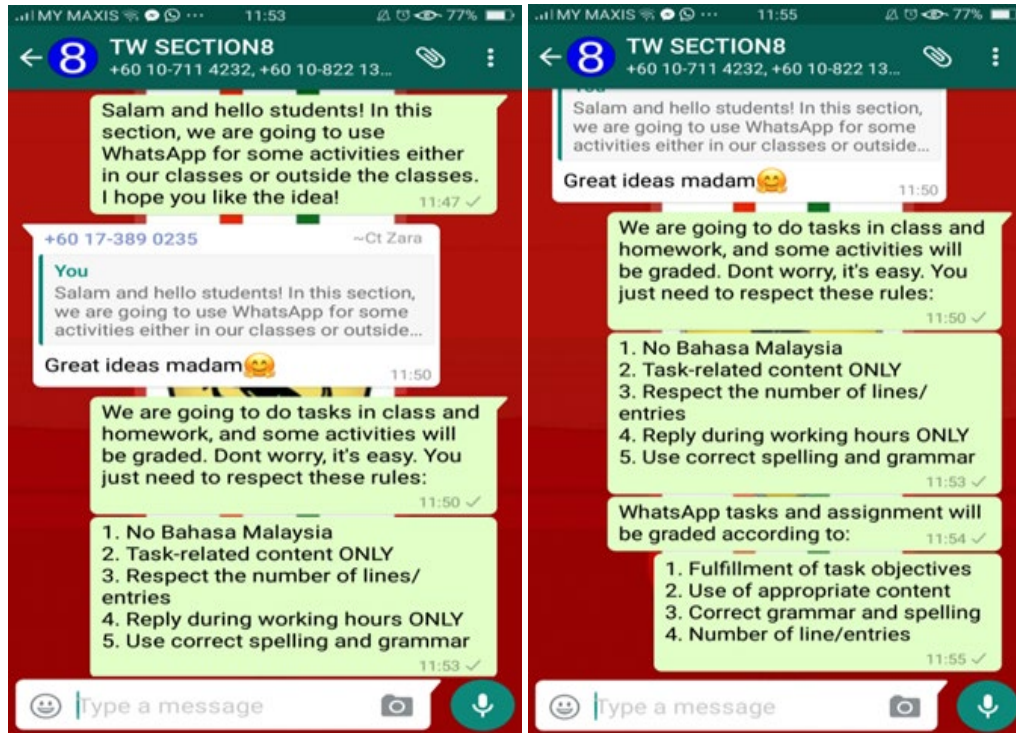

Figure 1: Rules setting

2.3 Implementing the Activities

You can implement the WhatsApp activities in a variety of ways, taking into account the circumstances and unique qualities of each group: as required homework, as extra practice for quick learners (with the advantage of having them in silence), as enjoyable and relaxing activities at the end of class, or as rewards for good behaviour. The initial message for each activity must be arranged since it serves as the starting point for chats and contains instructions that all students must understand.

2.4 Activities Conducted

2.4.1 Filling the Gap

The teacher writes a sentence but leaves out one word (a preposition/conjunction/article, etc) and uses the underscore (_) in its place and sends this to the WhatsApp group. Students need to answer the missing word.
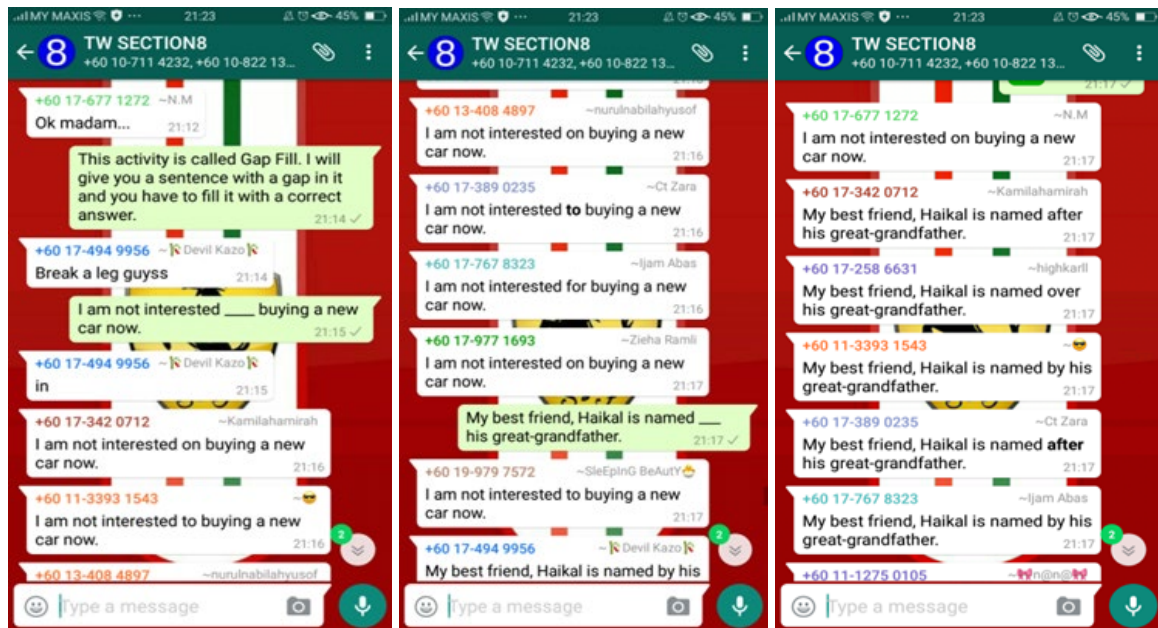
Figure 2: Filling the gap

2.4.2 Correct the Sentence

A sentence is written and sent to the WhatsApp group by the teacher, but it has a grammatical, spelling, or vocabulary error. The students are required to correct the sentence and rewrite it back.
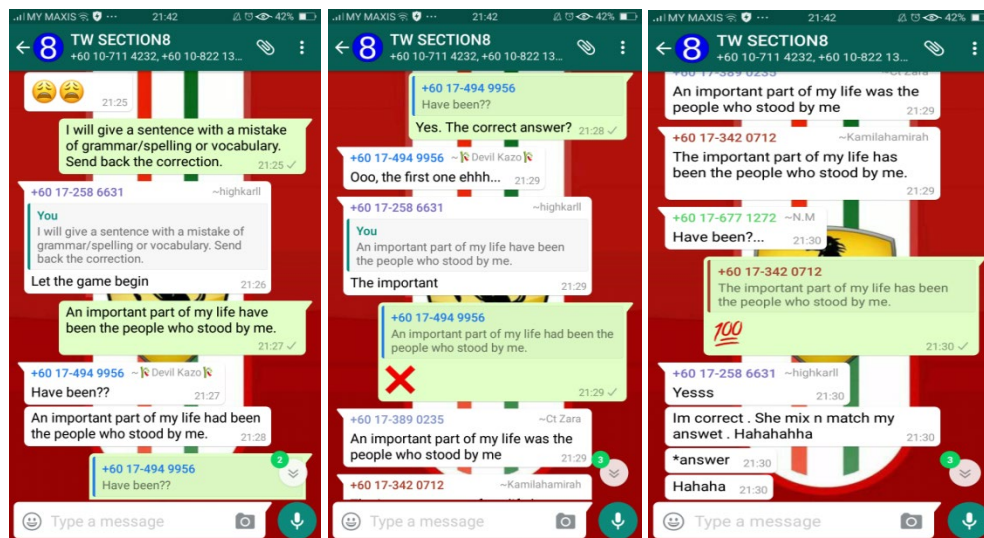

Figure 3: Correct the sentence

2.4.3 Spell It Right

The teacher sends a recorded message asking 'How do you spell ____?" (with a word of choice in the gap). Send this to a WhatsApp group and students reply with audio or text with the correct spelling.

Figure 4: Spell it right

2.4.4 Mock Interview

The teacher records questions and sends these one at a time. Students record and send back the answers.

2.4.5 My Audio Diary

Students record what they are doing at different times of the day. They can share and compare how similar or different their days are.

2.4.6 Oh My English!

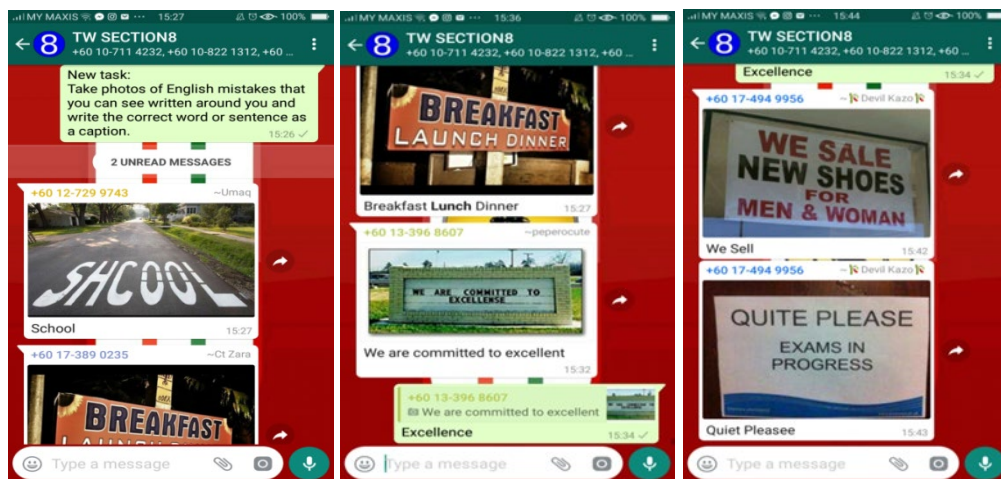Students take a photo of examples of English mistakes they see written around them.

Figure 5: Oh my English!

2.4.7 Show and Tell

Students prepare and record a 30-second presentation on a topic of their choice.

2.4.8 This is My Meal

Over the course of one day, students take photos of everything that they eat and write what the foods are as captions for each photo. Students can then compare who has the best/worst diet.
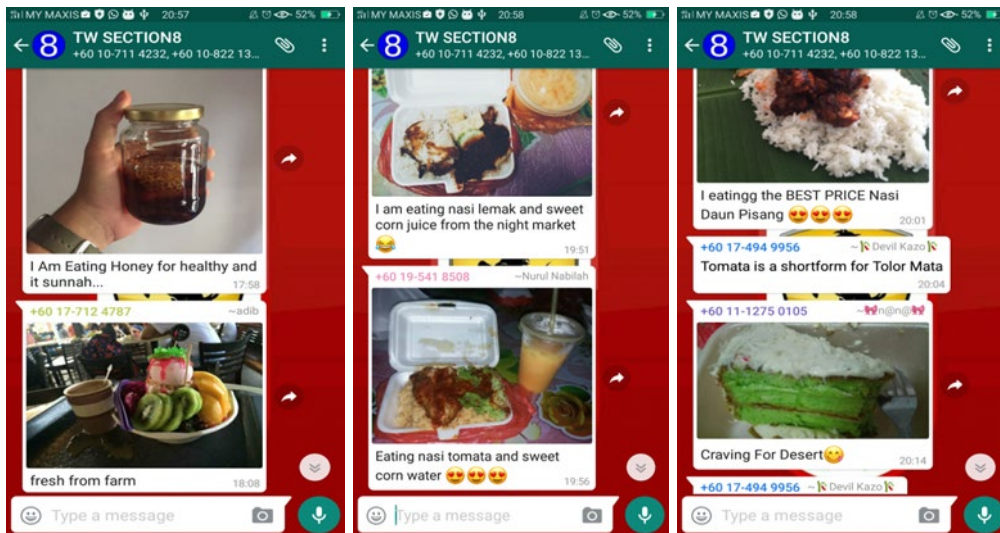
Figure 6: This is my meal

2.4.9 Show Me the Feeling

The teacher writes and sends the name of emotion (for example: happy, angry, in love, etc). Students have to illustrate emotion with a selfie.
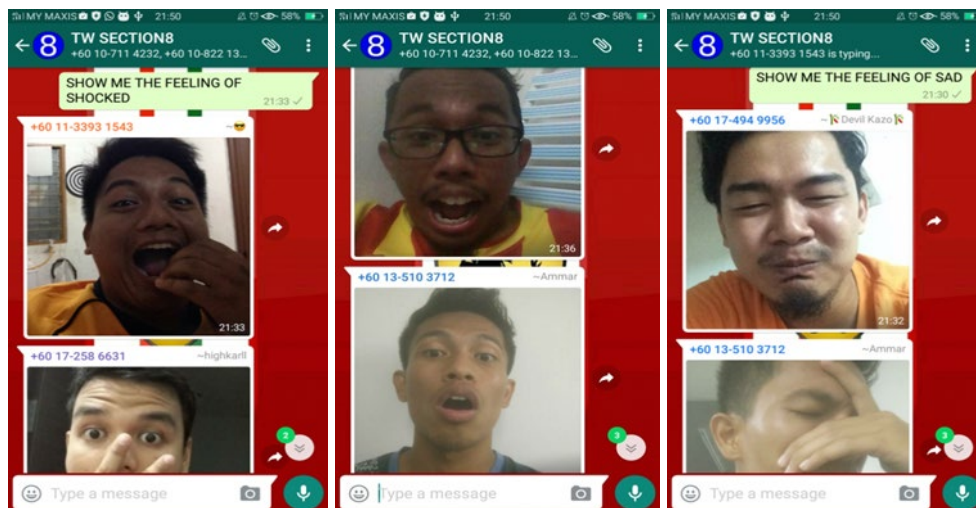

Figure 7: Show me the feeling

2.4.10 How to Pronounce This?

The teacher chooses a word and sends it to a WhatsApp group, writing 'How to pronounce _____?' (with the chosen word in the gap). The student has to record the pronunciation of the word.
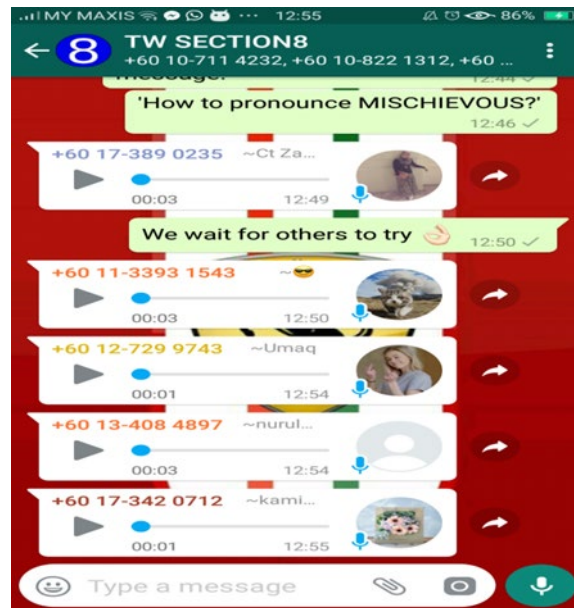
Figure 8: How to pronounce this?

2.4.11 Create a Story

The teacher chooses four emojis and sends these to the WhatsApp group. The students need to write a very short story (or sentence) that contains all four of the words/concepts that correspond to the emoji.

Figure 9: Create a story

2.4.12 Listen! Listen! Listen!

The teacher chooses a sentence, records it and sends it to the WhatsApp group. Students need to write out the sentence and send it back to be checked.
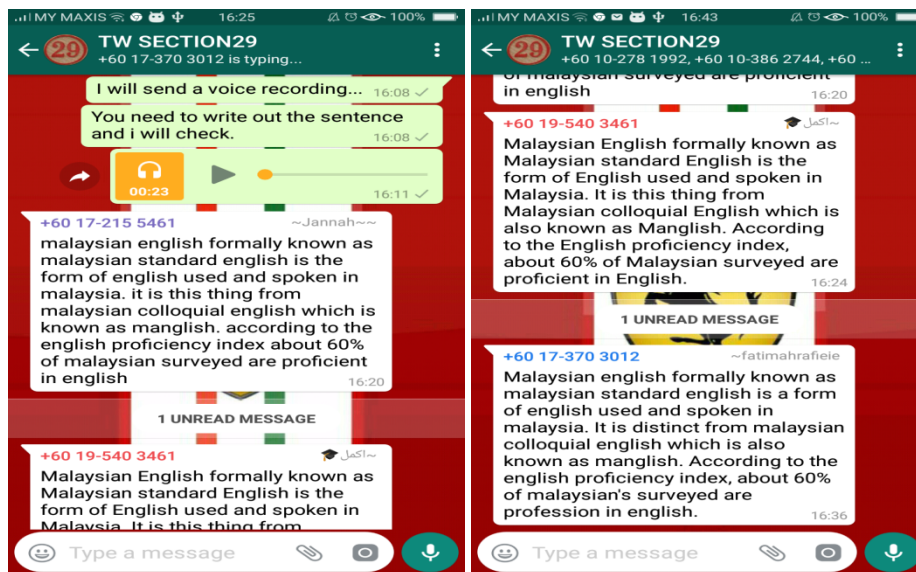
Figure 10: Listen! Listen! Listen!

2.4.13 Short Story

The teacher sends a photo and lets the students write a short story or a narration for the photo as a caption.
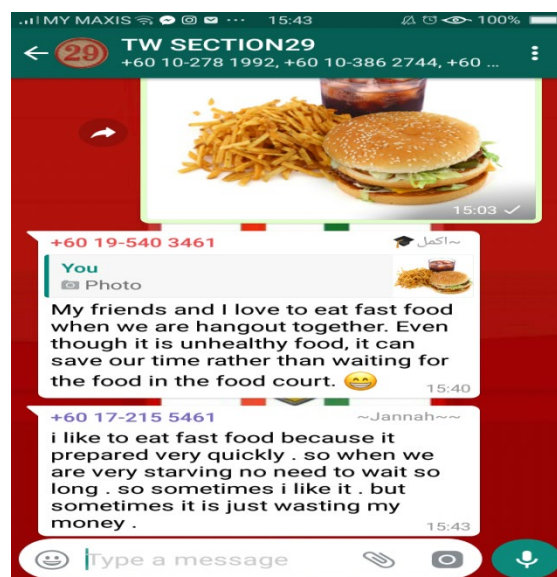

Figure 11: Short story

3. Results and Discussion

There are four advantages found from the observation of participants' experiences during the activities conducted through the WhatsApp application.

1. It is much faster to communicate using WhatsApp groups. If not, time would be wasted attempting to communicate the message in some other way. Reminding students of what they need to bring, do, and where everything happens, also improves class efficiency. It is simple for teachers to communicate with their students by sending information, running the class, and keeping them informed.

2. It may foster a sense of community and belonging, and teachers can model or cultivate a friendly social environment. Everyone can read and receive the same message given in the group and nobody will be left out. Students have the option of responding to the message by text or audio. Emojis may also be used to react and respond which makes communication more enjoyable and interesting.

3. It helps students communicate with one another. They can exchange knowledge and collaborate. It not only improves students' language skills but also their communication abilities when students start to assist one another, provide comments, respond to one another's inquiries and share their knowledge.

4. Using the groups as a learning platform to improve the accessibility of learning materials and the performance of learning activities. Once a teacher uses this kind of platform, it will become not only for subject matters. For example, the group is created for practicing writing but at the same time, students begin posting personal observations and sharing some information or motivational quotes which shows that the group has a social aspect and can become a support group. This kind of platform can give a positive influence on the social atmosphere and a source of enjoyment for the students.

In terms of students' motivation, it can be seen that students are engaged and active in doing the activities given through WhatsApp. When students have positive social interactions with their peers or teacher, they will become more engaged in learning. Social interaction occurred when students work in a group, have group discussions, group projects, and group presentations (Williams & Williams, 2011). This is again a perfect task for MALL because interactivity is the main feature of the WhatsApp application. Therefore, MALL can improve and promote learning motivation through various types of activities conducted, but most of all through open-mindedness and imagination.

WhatsApp can help to reinforce classroom topics and improve conversations, collaborative work, and even writing. Teachers may use these tools to encourage critical thinking, cooperation, and knowledge production not only in areas of language instruction but more than that. Many teachers opt to utilise their mobile phones as the medium of instruction during the home-based online learning session but teachers themselves are unable to utilise this technology for language learning. This raises a fundamental worry concerning its usage in language acquisition. However, teachers are familiar with the use of WhatsApp in their personal life. Therefore, WhatsApp can aid in overcoming this annoyance. Many language activities can be applied; they don't always have to be in online-class assignments because there may not always be internet access all the time. When students eventually connect to Wi-Fi, these activities can be continued outside of the online classroom. The key is to design activities that require students to do all of the work outside of the formal class meetings. Every student must be a part of the WhatsApp group so they can interact and complete the tasks. The teacher is not required to participate in the activities but more to direct or facilitate the activities.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

It is clear from the aforementioned observation and evidence that WhatsApp group is one of the important tools for students to learn languages. Using WhatsApp group allows students to interact effortlessly and improve their ideas by exchanging information more quickly. Through group conversations, WhatsApp increases students' involvement in their language learning. In conclusion, using WhatsApp group in the classroom to learn a language would be advantageous for the students and should also be incorporated since it might make the learning process more engaging and successful. This is quite true in terms of preparing our educational system for language teaching and learning in the twenty-first century. To promote students' learning of the language outside of the online classroom, educators should look to see how this sort of application may be properly integrated into a learning setting. This study has a few limitations that future studies should consider such as conducting an interview or distributing a questionnaire to get an in-depth of students' perception of the effectiveness

of WhatsApp group in English language teaching and learning. Therefore, it is hoped that this study can be continued to find the most effective activities that will make the best of language learners which in turn makes MALL to be more widely used.

Acknowledgement

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