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WhatsApp in language classroom: Gauging Saudi EFL teachers' roles and experiences

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Abstract

The current study used primary data to evaluate teachers' agency from a dialogical perspective that utilizes WhatsApp (WA) to bring innovation into a Saudi EFL classroom via comparative research methods. The findings of the study showed that the use of WhatsApp outside the English classroom created conducive opportunities for students to develop independence, practice what they read, work together and switch from being passive learners to active ones. The study concludes that EFL teachers in the Saudi context are positively disposed towards adopting an active role of agency encouraging dialogical perspective via WA.

Keywords: Agency, Interaction, Learning tool, WhatsApp, Qassim university.

WhatsApp en el aula de idiomas: evaluando el rol y la experiencia de los maestros de EFL sauditas

Resumen

El estudio actual utilizó datos primarios para evaluar la teoría de la agencia de los docentes desde una perspectiva dialógica que utiliza WhatsApp para llevar la innovación al aula de EFL a través de métodos de investigación comparativos. Los resultados sauditos del estudio

mostraron que el uso de WhatsApp fuera del aula de inglés creó oportunidades propicias para que los estudiantes desarrollen su independencia, practiquen lo que leen, trabajen juntos y pasen de ser estudiantes pasivos a ser activos. El estudio puede concluir con confianza en que los maestros de EFL en Arabia Saudita están dispuestos a adoptar el papel de agencia que fomenta la perspectiva dialógica a través de WA.

Palabras clave: Agencia, Interacción, Herramienta de aprendizaje, WhatsApp.

1. INTRODUCTION

EFL's utilization of technology encounters some major obstacles. Primary is the accessibility of technology (both internet connection and infrastructure) in the classroom. Second, and more worrisome, is the techno-phobia among teachers as they are frequently either ignorant of the aid of technology in linguistic learning or are not convinced as to its efficacy. These obstacles can be overcome by WhatsApp or similar popular apps. When our classrooms are not well equipped, we can utilize the technology that students have on their phones and tablets, regardless of whether there is internet access in the EFL classroom. The teacher can set up many activities and extend them beyond the classroom when students are connected to Wi-Fi. Alternatively, at different stages of activities, students can show each other their phones. With these easy reach technologies, everyone in the group whether students or teachers, can see and listen to the answers of everyone in the community conversation. Students may receive additional credit either for asking questions or for responding to others' questions. Mobile devices with fast-evolving apps like

WhatsApp have become popular in recent years in EFL language courses because it offers unique and diverse learning and teaching opportunities (AL-AHDAL & SHARIQ, 2019). With WhatsApp, teachers have the chance to monitor and check their language output for mistakes in an EFL classroom. Further, students are able to refine their speech while they are rehearsing it (accent, intonation, speed of speech) while being more open and responsive to language.

While previous research focused on the effects of using technology in language learning lessons, the majority of these studies invariably concentrate on the results and perceptions of language learning technology use; very few studies over time have explored the dynamics and complexity of the teaching agency by using technology and technology implementation i.e. how technologies could increase the teachers' engagement in the ELT classroom. In addition, fewer studies examine the benefits of using WhatsApp from a dialogical point of view for language learning outside the EFL classroom.

However, EFL classroom contexts have their unique set pf problems such as, restricted opportunities for dialogic interactions that can be beneficial for learners to produce the target language (AL-AHDAL, ALFALLAJ, AL-AWAIED & AL-HATTAMI, 2014). Dialogue/ Teacher's role is not merely a skill for achieving some cognitive outcomes; it is a tool of transforming classroom social relationships and raising awareness of society-wide relationships. Dialogue is both a way of recreating information and a means of learning (HAMAD, 2017). It is a system of cooperative learning in

which the educator presents critical inquiry problems. The very idea of dialogue in language learning discounts linear lecture method as a pedagogy where the teacher is like a fountainhead of all information and learners are silent recipients. Rather, in this dispensation, teachers and students incorporate learning into a collaborative process in a participative environment to illustrate and respond which poses problems. This mechanism is located in students' thoughts, culture, desires, and circumstances. It is also influenced by the teacher's subject matter and education, which needs a great deal of improvisation in the classroom by encouraging, facilitating and if need be, initiating dialogue to connect previous learning with the current lesson.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that seeks to evaluate trends in teacher perceptions towards a dialogical perspective in the role of teachers as an agency that facilitates learning vis WhatsApp. The respondents were sixty EFL teachers across four colleges under the Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. Four weeks prior to the study, during two teachers' workshops on new methods in EFL pedagogy, the researchers had sensitized teachers (N=120) on ongoing research and suggested methods in foreign language teaching. The key concepts discussed therein were, among others, new mobile tools that can be used in learning, teachers as facilitators in the learning process and, ecological and dialogical perspectives to language teaching. Volunteers were sought who would be willing to form WhatsApp

groups with their learners back in the colleges over which they would act as agents by encouraging interactive methods in EFL. Seventy-eight teachers reverted with the willingness to undertake the experiment, post vetting for uniformity on parameters of age, gender, teaching experience, basic and highest qualification, courses taught, and training workshops attended by them, sixty teachers across four colleges were accepted. The experiment period was four weeks as constraints of time, syllabus and examinations prevented greater leverage and the number of students that each teacher was to engage was one section comprising a minimum of twenty-five and a maximum of thirty-two students. They were requested to maintain a Daily Diary to record their observations of the learners' participation, questioning, ability and interest in connecting current to previous knowledge, answering questions including those of their peers, keenness and interest in the learning process (KANG'ETHE, 2015).

Once the study period expired, a short perception questionnaire with eight items and five subjective questions were emailed to the teachers for their response. The questionnaire was based on a five-point Likert Scale wherein the close-ended bivalent questions elicited responses on teachers' constructs on their beliefs and perceptions based on observations recorded during the experiment period (WERTSCH, TULVISTE & HAGSTROM, 1993). The teachers were guided to consult their daily diaries before filling in the questionnaires so that they stayed as close to their immediate observations as possible. All the eight questions loaded onto three factors in the survey, viz, i. enhanced learner participation in the new approach; ii.

Learners' willingness to connect previous and current learning and; iii. Teachers' positive disposition towards the new approach as compared to the conventional ones. All responses to the one negatively phrased questions (no. 2) were carefully examined and none of them were found to be inconsistent with similar positively phrased questions, showing that the responses were indeed filled carefully. Hence, none of them were felt fit to be discarded. We present the response collected under Table 1 below. The responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 1: Teacher feedback on their role as the agency in initiating and sustaining dialogical interaction with EFL learners via WhatsApp as a learning aid.

No.	Question	1	2	3	4	5
1	I find the asking of questions related to previous academic chats on WhatsApp to be useful in my current lesson.	1	0	7	13	39
2	WA distracts my students as mostly they tend to go to non-academic chats in groups other than of the EFL class.	13	29	8	4	6
3	Compared to instructions, commands and statements, my learners of the WA group respond in greater numbers when I post class content-related questions to them.	2	6	5	15	32
4	With WA and dialogical intervention of the teacher's agency, I feel the EFL classes are more student-oriented.	0	0	0	7	43
5	As part of the dialogical practice, I frequently repeat questions that	7	7	8	11	27

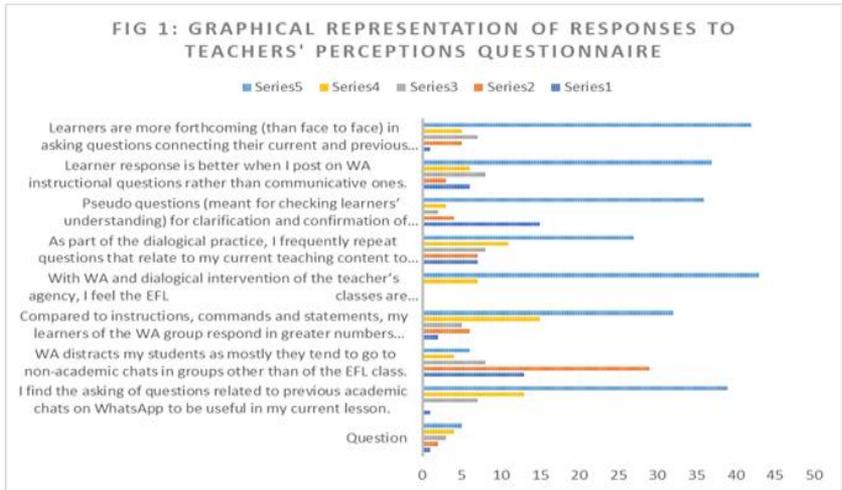|						
	relate to my current teaching content to the previous ones.					
6	Pseudo questions (meant for checking learners' understanding) for clarification and confirmation of curricular content is appreciated by my learners.	15	4	2	3	36
7	Learner response is better when I post on WA instructional questions rather than communicative ones.	6	3	8	6	37
8	Learners are more forthcoming (than face to face) in asking questions connecting their current and previous knowledge when we interact over WA.	1	5	7	5	42

Fig.1

3. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS, AND DISCUSSION

We know that Likert Scale responses are ordinal in nature, meaning that though the responses are rated or ranked, the distance between them is not measurable. This necessitates the computation of two other factors, median and inter-quartile range (IQR) which fall under the purview of descriptive statistics. Median being a measure of Central Tendency tells us what a majority of the respondents believe, and IQR shows the spread of response, i.e. how dispersed or varied is the response across respondent database, and for response to be seen as consistent, a lower IQR is preferred as it shows that all or a large number of respondents feel the same way about the questions or statement.

In all questions except Q2 and Q5, the median value rests at 5 which goes to show that most of the respondents strongly believe in the following:

1. A dialogical approach using WhatsApp is found useful by the teachers;

2. Student response is more wholesome when the teacher posts questions related to the teaching content on the WA group compared to what it is in a conventional classroom;

3. Teacher agency from a dialogical perspective that uses WA as a learning instrument brings the learners into the center of the learning universe;

4. Learners appreciated being asked feedback on their understanding of content done in class or followed up on WA.

5. Learners are less inhibited in asking questions about previous and current lessons via WA.

In Q2 the median value rests at 2, but this is a negatively phrased question and a response clustered at 2 shows that a huge number of teachers' experience that the distraction caused by learners wandering off to chat on WA groups while the teacher is working on a lesson with them, is negligible. IQR for questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8 is low at 1 for four questions (1, 2, 3, 8), and at 2 for two questions (4, 7), showing high consensus amongst the respondents.

The biggest benefit of WhatsApp for the students was its ability to create a school environment outside the classroom by portraying a digital link between the student, the teacher, and the classroom. The teacher's activities in the WhatsApp have influenced the learning environment of the students to a great extent by giving them the opportunity to practice English comfortably and ask questions that connect their current and previous knowledge rather than face to face. Teachers agreed that WhatsApp has created a new environment that reinforces their relationship with students and makes their learning more casual, thus raising them to another level. In addition, the teacher's ability to casually participate in WhatsApp increased the agency's ability to teach English in an improved way. According to our observation through questionnaire results, more initiatives in English

practices were demonstrated by students through the WhatsApp. This is consistent with other studies that show that the informal experiences assisted by social networking boost language learning performance (e.g. ALQASHAM, 2018; ARNOLD, DUCATE, & KOST 2009; KESSLER, & BIKOWSKI, 2010). Out of the 60 teachers, 43 claimed that with WA and the teachers' agency's dialog intervention, the EFL classes were more oriented to students. Although a few expressed the limitations on the use of WA as it sometimes distracts students, they mainly tend to go to non-academic chats in groups other than EFL (MUFANTI & SUSILO, 2016). The theoretical contribution of this research has broadened the scope of researching advancement in language learning. This study focused more on the process of acceptance and use over time in the socio-cultural environment of the learner, rather than concentrating on the overall impact of innovation. This study confirms that technology for social networks, in particular WhatsApp can be implemented in the EFL classroom in a cooperative environment that could raise the teachers' involvement in teaching English which, in turn, could improve language teaching even outside of their classrooms. The use of WhatsApp has shown much pedagogical potential, such as the benefit of the innovative opportunities to overcome contextual constraints, particularly to increase the social interaction between students and teachers, to modify the roles of teachers and to increase student autonomy. Social networking and WhatsApp have significant pedagogical consequences and can potentially contribute to the achievement of its goals to make greater use of digital education and, in particular, to the Saudi English learning environment.

The role of WhatsApp transferred teachers from a state of impotence to a state of power and from being purely instructional and educational recipients to initiators of change to more successful and active educators. The results obtained in this study could be of use in teacher training, language training and development of teaching materials for the ongoing professional development programs in second language learning courses.

4. CONCLUSION

Teachers were asked to report on the following five questions as part of the subjective evaluation of their perspective on teacher agency using WA:

1. What are the challenges that EFL teachers face today that were not to be seen a decade earlier?

2. How supportive is your institution insofar as teacher development in new ELT approaches is concerned?

3. At an individual level, do you feel a need to bring about a change in your pedagogy? In what direction would you like the change to be?

4. How does technology affect your teaching and you as an agency?

5. What are your aspirations from the self as a teacher agency and your institution?

The teachers were requested to answer these questions briefly but in a focused manner as far as possible. Once the responses were obtained, the researchers set about isolating keywords in each response to each question. The aim was to collect the recurring themes and concerns of the teachers. Accordingly, keywords that loaded onto the three factors around which the questionnaire was prepared, were analyzed and the following generalizations were drawn:

1. EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia find the invasion of technology as the biggest challenge as they find themselves ill-equipped to keep pace with what interests their learners, they feel this is a primary reason for the learners' poor motivation.

2. Teacher development is certainly not a top priority with the institutions as they have their own administrative, policy and financial labyrinths to unentangle to ensure frequent and periodic development programs that can update the teachers to the latest findings and ongoing experiments in ELT pedagogy.

3. Teachers are open to learning what it takes to engage the young learners but compulsions of time and impossible workloads prevent them. They, however, acknowledge that technology is the new synonym of education, and to stay in the

field they need to match the times. They place the onus of providing the requisite resources for this on their institutions.

4. As teachers, they are happy to note that educational developments are now looking for new ways to keep the spotlight on the learners. They endeavor in their own ways to be the agent in the EFL classroom and to teach with the dialogical perspective in mind (which the researchers had introduced to them) but hope to be provided firm and frequent guidance in how to keep improvising their pedagogies to best serve learner needs.

The study can conclude with confidence that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are positively disposed towards adopting the role of agency encouraging dialogical perspective via WA.

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