

TEACHING ENGLISH IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM USING WHATSAPP DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By:

Rekha Asmara

*English Language Education Study Program at FKIP Islamic University of Ogan Komering Ilir
Kayuagung, South Sumatera
rekha.asmara@gmail.com*

Abstract: Due to the severe situation of Covid-19 pandemic, teacher and students were forced to conduct online learning which was conducted synchronously or virtually. In a virtual classroom, teachers and students are all connected online via communication tools or their devices such as a computer, laptop, or smartphone at the same time. WhatsApp (WA) was considered as an online platform that supported the virtual classroom. Through WA, sharing information combined with some formats of file such as audio, video files, images, and location data could be done. This study was conducted to know some challenges of teaching English in a virtual classroom using WhatsApp during Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative descriptive research method was used. The data were collected by distributing questionnaires to the fourteen students and an interview with the lecturer of Classroom WhatsApp group of Language in Society class. The findings displayed that the challenges were; 1) students' attendance checking, 2) students' English language skills, and 3) internet connection.

Keywords: online learning, virtual classroom, whatsapp group

INTRODUCTION

In recent months, the condition of countries all over the world is pathetic because of the widespread of Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic mainly causes an increase of human death's rate in many countries. Besides, this also impacts on the changes of many systems of life such

associal, economic, especially on educational systems.

In the Indonesian educational context, there was an obvious change in the implementation of the teaching and learning process. In the former context, teaching activities mostly took place in the classroom synchronously between teacher and students. But, now, during the times of Covid-19 pandemic, it changes to

online learning. As stated by Widiastuti, Mantra, and Sukoco (2020, p.6), "In the education sector, this phenomenon certainly has a strong impact on how the learning process should be conducted. The quick solution is by utilizing online learning as what has been suggested by the Indonesian education authority". In other words, there is a system transformation on how to teach students from physical to virtual classroom.

In a virtual classroom, teachers and students are all connected online via communication tools or their devices such as a computer, laptop, or smartphone at the same time. There are some presentation and some interaction. However, it is not easy for teachers to conduct teaching in a virtual classroom context since only a few teachers and lecturers are

capable of carrying out the course or lesson through an online learning system. Further, both teachers and learners must be well-prepared with this current system of learning. This also needs an extra effort from teachers and learners to achieve the learning objectives.

Because of the awareness of the lack of knowledge of online learning, teachers offer a solution to use WhatsApp as a medium of learning. Based on the observation, it seems WhatsApp is the most popular application that has been being used by people for communicating virtually. Nitza and Roman (2016) state that WhatsApp is a smartphone application intended for sending instant messages that can be sent both personally and in-group form to communicate with several people simultaneously. Similar to this

notion, Sampath, Kalyani, Soohinda, and Dutta (2017, p. 110) also explain that WA offers real-time texting or communication combined with easy sharing of information (e.g., contact lists) and media content (e.g., audio, video files, images, and location data).

Thus, WhatsApp is used to support the teaching and learning process in a virtual classroom during the times of Covid-19 pandemic. In its implementation for university students, the lecturer gives the students assignment dealing with the lesson topic in every meeting. For example, the students are asked to work in a group and to solve the problems/questions related to the given learning materials. To control the materials in order not to be far beyond the syllabus, the lecturers can share some e-books to the students.

But, the students are still allowed to access the information from many sources that are related to the materials before they discuss in their group and share it to the whole class. Next, the students also need to send their assignments to the email account of the lecturer. Anggraeni (2018, p.13) claims that this teaching and learning process helps the students to be active since the activities reflect students-centred learning. Nonetheless, both lecturer and students still face some problems when they are experiencing a virtual classroom using WhatsApp. Based on the above case, the purpose of this study was to reveal some facts that could answer the following research question: “What are challenges of teaching English in a virtual classroom using WhatsApp during Covid-19 pandemic?”.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive research method was used. A qualitative description design is particularly relevant where information is required directly from those experiencing the phenomenon under investigation and where time and resources are limited. According to Rahman and Iwan (2019, p.27), the qualitative descriptive method is a method of researching an object, a set of conditions, a system of thought to make a description, a systematic, factual and accurate description of the facts, properties, and relationships between the phenomena investigated. Based on this view, the students' and lecturer's perceptions toward the challenges of teaching English in a virtual classroom using WhatsApp became the phenomena investigated in this study.

The subjects of this study were 1 lecturer and 14 students enrolled in Language in Society class. Language in Society class was one of the subjects taught in the sixth semester students of English Language Education Study Program at Islamic University of Ogan Komering Ilir Kayuagung. During the process of teaching and learning, Classroom WhatsApp group was created for 'Language in Society' class. The students were assigned to discuss the certain material within their groups and present it in every meeting in the Classroom WhatsApp group. In this group, they should share the PowerPoint slides and the summary of the given material in word/doc format. They could also share the recorded video of a presentation created by themselves. The video was the compilation of every

member's performance produced at their own home. Furthermore, they should answer the questions from their friends and would get feedback from their friends toward their answers.

The data were collected through the use of a close-ended questionnaire and interview as the instruments. The questionnaires consisted of five statements were given to 14 students and the interview was done to the lecturer of Language and Society class. The students' perceptions toward the challenges faced during teaching Language and Society in a virtual classroom using WhatsApp were revealed on the statements of the questionnaire. Moreover, the interview was done to know what challenges found by the lecturer in

teaching Language and Society in a virtual classroom using WhatsApp.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After experiencing with the virtual classroom activities, the students' creativity, critical thinking, and their learning autonomy were developed by the lecturer during the process. The students were trained to find out the problem solving of the problems they got during online learning. When they were assigned to work in groups to prepare a presentation in the form of PowerPoint slides or Video, they should think as critical as they could since it was in the times of Covid-19 pandemic that led everyone to do the activities from home including working and learning. Here, the students got their learning autonomy to decide what they should do to

accomplish the assignment together with their friends in a group without physically interacting with each other. Referring to language learning, autonomous learning can be implemented to help the students study language both in and out of the classroom (Anggraeni, 2018, p.16). Besides, students conducted online collaboration to do their assignment. Nitza and Roman (2016) state that WhatsApp groups served for communicating with students, nurturing a social atmosphere in the classroom, forming dialogue and collaborations between students, and as a means of learning.

Based on the results of the questionnaire given to students, it was viewed that students liked to post their presentation assignment in the 'Language in Society' WhatsApp group. Furthermore, those types of

assignments had utilized the various features offered in WhatsApp. The format of presentation material was in various formats such as PowerPoint slides, word/document, a video which included audio and visuals. Those features were provided by WhatsApp so that many works could be conducted only on one platform. WA can send a message, picture, audio, and video from one person to another or group (Bakhtiyar, p.108).

Furthermore, the questionnaire showed that 11 students said to agree that uploading their assignment in WhatsApp motivate them to have good English language skill both spoken and written forms, meanwhile, the two students chose to disagree. It could be said that the lecturer should pay more attention to the student's speaking and writing

virtually. It could be seen that the students were motivated and they also needed to show their attempts in increasing their English language skills, especially in speaking and writing. 11 students agreed that uploading their assignment in WhatsApp was easily conducted. It indicated that WhatsApp was beneficial to apply in the virtual classroom. That was why most people tended to use WhatsApp as a tool or media for communication because it offered benefits as it also happened when it was used in the classroom context. It supported the process of teaching in virtual context especially in running it synchronously.

Moreover, as stated in the results of the questionnaire, all participants (14 students) agreed that the lecturer needed to use an

appropriate teaching medium that could cover their virtual meeting effectively. Therefore, here, WhatsApp was considered appropriate to use since it could bring many benefits for lecturer and students in conducting a virtual classroom during the pandemic times.

However, 4 students viewed that they had difficulties in sending their assignments, especially through e-mail due to they did not have an e-mail account. It meant that they had to create an e-mail account. Meanwhile, 10 out of 14 students pointed out that they got a problem when they uploaded the assignments/when they were running online learning since they did not have a good internet connection. It was also because many students who enrolled in the sixth semester were

from small villages around the location of the campus. The internet connection was not stable for much of the time. Therefore, the assignment they sent to the lecturer tended to be received by the lecturer a few hours or even one day later after the meeting.

As a whole, based on the results of the questionnaire given to the students which were described above and the interview done to the lecturer of Language Society class described in the following, it was found that there were some challenges of teaching English using WhatsApp that was not only felt by the lecturer but also by the students. Those challenges were as follow: 1) students' attendance checking, 2) students' English language skills, and 3) internet connection.

Students' Attendance Checking

Teaching and learning activities needed some media to help the lecturer to clarify the materials presented to the students. By using teaching media, the students would be more enthusiastic and interested in joining the classroom learning. Hence, the lecturer utilized WhatsApp as the teaching medium to know how efficient it was for supporting virtual classroom learning. Consequently, the students got new experience in learning English through the use of WhatsApp. However, the lecturer found it was quite consuming much time at the beginning of classroom activities. The lecturer had to wait for the response of every student which was regarded as the student's presence in the virtual classroom. Not every student was responsive to

show their presence in the Classroom WhatsApp group even though he/she had been joining the group from the beginning of the lesson.

There was no feature in WhatsApp that indicated the number of participants who were attending the classroom from the beginning up to the end of course hour. Therefore, it took a long time just for checking the students' attendance. The lecturer's responses were presented below.

I chose WhatsApp to teach my students online as I believed that this application was the most common application that everybody has used and of course it offered some benefits for me and my students. After some time, I found there was a weakness of this application. I didn't know exactly whether all of my students had joined the group or not during the class hour. I would know their existence only from their responses. As a result, I needed to count the number of students who responded to my greetings, instruction, and so on to know their presence during the activities. Or, I should wait for several minutes just to see they responded to my greeting one by one.

Students' English Language Skills

WhatsApp group for 'Language in Society' course which was conducted in the virtual classroom during the times of Covid-19 pandemic required students to have good English skills especially in presenting the learning materials both spoken and written. This was in line with what Widiastuti, Mantra, and Sukoco (2020, p.6) state that it was highly important to improve students' speaking skill although corona virus pandemic has disadvantaged students from face to face learning. The students assigned as the presenters must be responsible with their group presentation, not only showing their performance but also preparing all the things needed for their presentation.

In delivering the presentation online, it was found that the students

still got difficulties especially in expressing ideas or sharing information about the materials orally. Consequently, they often wrote what they said. In other words, their utterances were delivered through written language. Meanwhile, when they chose to make a video of their presentation, students would have more preparation. The level of English language skills of the students was different from one another. This level became one of the challenges in using WhatsApp to teach students in the virtual classroom context. According to Alqahtani, Bhaskar, Elumalai, and Abumelha (2018, p.110), one should have the understanding and familiarity with English to exploit the application, as it features the application of English

in all its aspects. The lecturer's responses were presented below.

During Covid-19 pandemic, I realized that I must teach my students virtually. Therefore, WhatsApp was then chosen to conduct our activities especially in delivering a presentation. It's quite hard for students/presenters in doing the presentation online. What to say should be written. Sometimes, the explanation was not clear enough for other participants to understand. When using video, it's hard for them to make it in this world situation. As a result, they had their autonomy in learning.

Internet Connection

Teaching a virtual classroom using WhatsApp was recommended for teacher and students in this pandemic times. Its implementation should be supported by a good internet connection. Most students enrolled in the Classroom WhatsApp group of 'Language in Society' lived in some villages where there was only low access to the internet. From the result of the interview, the lecturer claimed that internet connection was low so that students

got difficulties in sharing the materials for learning, compiling the segmented video collaboratively with their friends through online, and in submitting the assignments to the lecturer's e-mail. The difficulty of accessing the internet because of its bad connection was felt by both the lecturer and students. It was in line with what Anggraeni (2018) finds that 15 out of 30 students pointed out that they got a problem when they uploaded the assignments since they did not have a good internet connection and supported handphone. See the lecturer's response below.

Students often chatted me personally through their WhatsApp account a few times after the activities ended. They explained about their suspension in submitting their assignment. Mainly, it was caused by the low access of internet in their villages. Let alone, they did not have enough money to buy the internet quota.

CONCLUSION

WhatsApp is one of the platforms that fit the needs of lecturer and college students in conducting a virtual classroom learning in the times of Covid-19 pandemic. Some challenges occurred during its implementation had to be solved by adding knowledge and ability about using WhatsApp as the teaching medium especially about its features, functions from various sources and level of education, considering whether or not the platform applied to the language level of students and using high-speed connectivity of internet that best supports a good connection for doing online learning.

REFERENCES

- Alqahtani, M., S., M., Bhaskar, C.V., Elumalai, K. V., & Abumelha, M. (2018). WhatsApp: An online platform for

- university-level English language education. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 9(4). Retrieved January 5th, 2020 from <https://www.researchgate.net>
- Anggraeni, C., W. (2018). Promoting education 4.0 in English for survival class: What are the challenges?. *Metathesis, Journal of English Language, Literature, and Teaching* 2(1). Retrieved January 15th, 2018 from <https://www.researchgate.net>
- Bakhtiyar, M., A. (2017). Promoting blended learning in vocabulary teaching through WhatsApp. *Nidhomul Haq: Jurnal Managemen Pendidikan Islam*, 2(2), 106-112. Retrieved January 15th, 2020 from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>
- Nitza, D. & Roman, Y. (2016). Whatsapp messaging: achievements and success in academia. *International Journal in Higher Education*, 5(4), 255-261. Retrieved March 6th, 2020 from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1119484>.
- Rahman, I., A., & Iwan. (2019). Blending Wattpad platform and English Prose Course in Industrialevolution Era 4.0. *Language in Focus (ELIF)*, 2(1), 25-32. Retrieved January 20th, 2020 from <https://jurnal.umj.ac.id/index.php/ELIF>
- Sampath, H., Kalyani, S., Soohinda, G., & Dutta, S. (2017). Patterns, attitudes, and dependence toward whatsapp among college students. *Journal of Mental Health and Human Behaviour*, 22:110-115. Retrieved March 27th from <http://www.jmhbb.org>
- Widiastuti, I. A.M.S., Mantra, I.B.N., & Sukoco, H. (2020). Mobile internet-based learning to cultivate students' speaking skill during coronavirus pandemic. *International Journal of Applied Science and Sustainable Development*, 2 (1). Retrieved March 6th, 2020 from e-journal.unmas.ac.id