

Emotional and social engagement of teenager and young adult students of EFL using MIM (Mobile Instant Messaging)

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Abstract. Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) applications have come into focus as potential tools to improve English language instruction, and teachers can engage more students from different backgrounds in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes thanks to MIM apps' distinctive features, like WhatsApp. Most of the reported studies on the use of WhatsApp in the teaching of foreign languages were performed in university or adult learning environments. The present study explores how social and emotional engagement manifest themselves in a popular instant messaging application group (WhatsApp) used by teenagers learning EFL. A focus group, a Likert scale survey, and a transcript of the WhatsApp chat were the three main sources from which data was gathered. Members' interaction records were retrieved and inductive thematic analysis was used to examine them. These findings suggest that WhatsApp provided communicative opportunities to all students, including those who did not fully engage. However, further research with a larger number of students in different contexts is necessary.

Keywords: engagement, mobile instant messaging, WhatsApp.

1. Introduction

Technological development in mobile technology has been advancing constantly, improving access to information and communication almost instantly and anywhere. With the development of mobile technology, the opportunities for

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How to cite this article: Martínez, D., & Appel, C. (2022). Emotional and social engagement of teenager and young adult students of EFL using MIM (Mobile Instant Messaging). In B. Arnþjórnisdóttir, B. Bédi, L. Bradley, K. Friðriksdóttir, H. Garðarsdóttir, S. Thouésny, & M. J. Whelpton (Eds), *Intelligent CALL, granular systems, and learner data: short papers from EUROCALL 2022* (pp. 258-265). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.61.1468>

interaction among the different participants in the teaching-learning process are expanding (López-Hernández & Silva-Pérez, 2016).

Young students today regularly use smartphones, social media, and instant messaging. Furthermore, according to recent studies (Rideout & Robb, 2018), teens prefer texting to talking, suggesting that MIM is their main form of communication. As a result of their widespread usage of mobile devices, this generation has developed a technological aptitude and has even begun networking and sharing via social media and mobile applications. MIM applications have therefore been identified as potential tools for enhancing foreign language learning (Andújar, 2016; Tang & Hew, 2017).

Although young people use MIM primarily to communicate, Tang and Hew (2017) claim that “we lack a comprehensive understanding of how MIM applications are used for teaching and learning” (p. 87). Furthermore, language teachers are constantly attempting to connect their students to school and learning because they recognise the importance of student engagement in academic achievement. When students are working on a task individually or in groups, they may react differently: some may be completely focused on the task, while others may be on and off. Engagement is a condition of increased attention and involvement in which participation is manifested not only cognitively but also socially, behaviourally, and emotionally (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). Therefore, learner engagement is essential for learning to be successful.

This study explores how social and emotional engagement manifest themselves in a popular MIM application, WhatsApp. It aims to gain a better understanding of how teenage students communicate with one another and the teacher in a WhatsApp group. This study focuses on emotional and social engagement as social engagement is inextricably linked to emotional engagement, particularly among child and adolescent learners (Philp, Oliver, & Mackey, 2008).

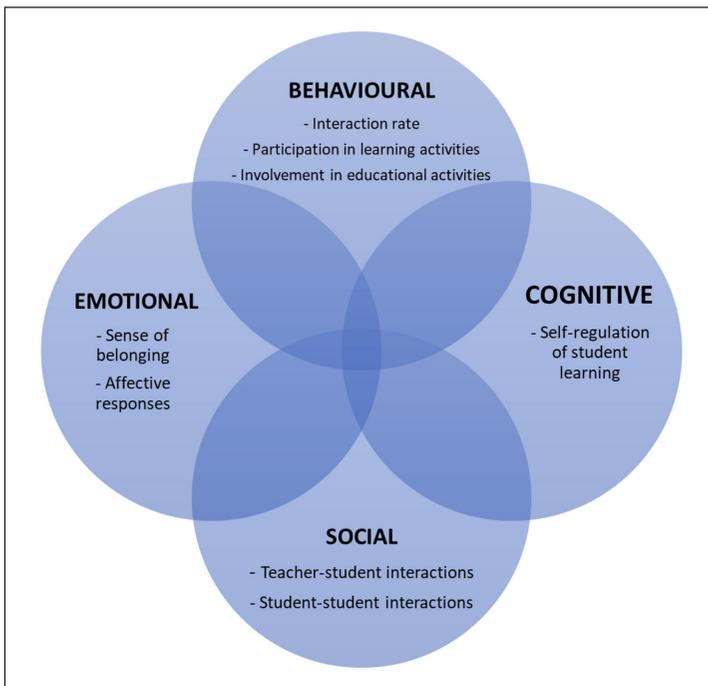
2. Theoretical framework

Student engagement has gained much attention over the last several decades as instructional methods have shifted toward student-centred, constructivist approaches (Wright, 2011). This study draws on a student engagement model by Bowden, Tickle, and Naumann (2019) which incorporates four dimensions: behavioural, emotional, social, and cognitive engagement (Figure 1), and presents results related to the emotional and social dimensions.

The social component of engagement should be considered an essential element of adolescent and young adult engagement (Bowden et al., 2019). It takes into account the connections that students make with their peers, faculty, and other key players in their educational process. Peer influence becomes more noticeable during adolescence, as teenagers spend more time with their peers and develop independence from their parents (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Interest, boredom, happiness, anxiety, and other affective states are all examples of emotional engagement and can all have an impact on how involved students are in their studies. In a nutshell, emotional engagement refers to both positive and negative responses to classmates and teachers. It is thought to have an effect on the student's motivation to complete the assigned tasks.

Figure 1. The four dimensions of student engagement (based on Bowden et al., 2019)



This study aims to gain a better understanding of how teenage and young adult students communicate with one another and their teacher in an EFL class WhatsApp group. With this objective, we pose the following research question: how do social and emotional engagement manifest itself in these WhatsApp group interactions?

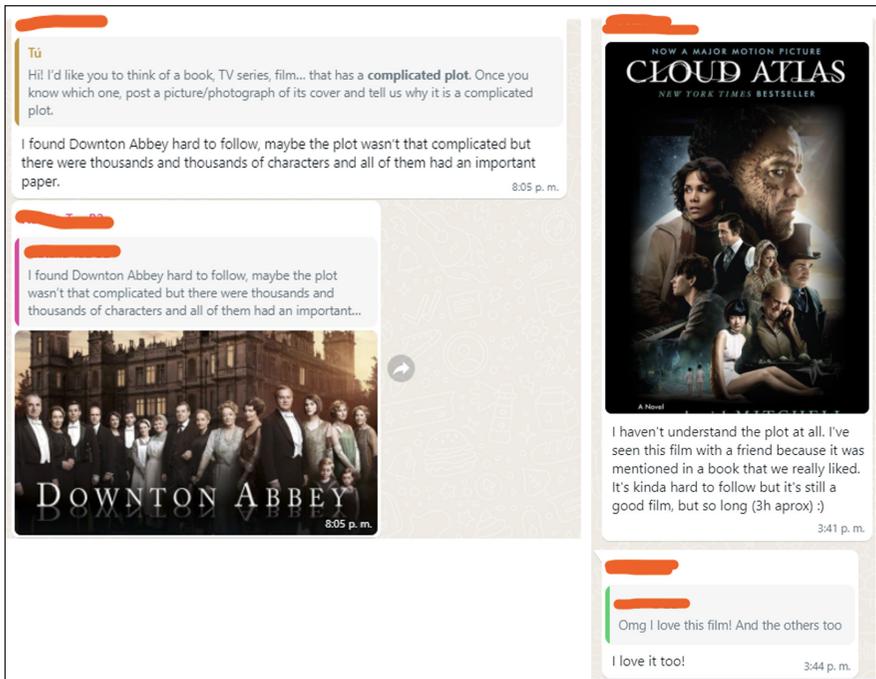
3. Method

This study was conducted in a real classroom environment in which WhatsApp was incorporated into natural educational practices. Students used the MIM service via the mobile app on their smartphones, and there were no mandates or constraints on how participants should use the app.

The 14 participants were teenage students, aged 13-17, enrolled in a B2 EFL course in a language school in Catalonia (2021-2022 school year). They were all studying EFL as an extracurricular activity and are bilingual in Catalan/Spanish. The class met twice a week for one and a half hour sessions.

The teacher was part of the WhatsApp group, and participation in the study was voluntary and did not affect grades. Students were encouraged to do different activities such as speaking tasks, both individually and in pairs, short writing exercises (Figure 2), and use the WhatsApp group in any way that might help them.

Figure 2. Example of writing task



Data³ was collected by means of a focus group, a Likert scale survey, and a transcript of the WhatsApp group (Table 1).

Table 1. Data collected

Dimensions of Engagement	Measuring how it happened	Type of Analysis	Data Sources
SOCIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-student interactions • Student-student interactions • Creation and maintenance of relationships during the study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative • (Inductive thematic analysis) • Quantitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group • WhatsApp group chat: how they interact, when, how often, etc. • Number of messages sent
EMOTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional reactions • Sense of belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative • (Inductive thematic analysis) • Quantitative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group • Questionnaire • WhatsApp group chat: number of emojis and words that express any emotion

4. Results and discussion

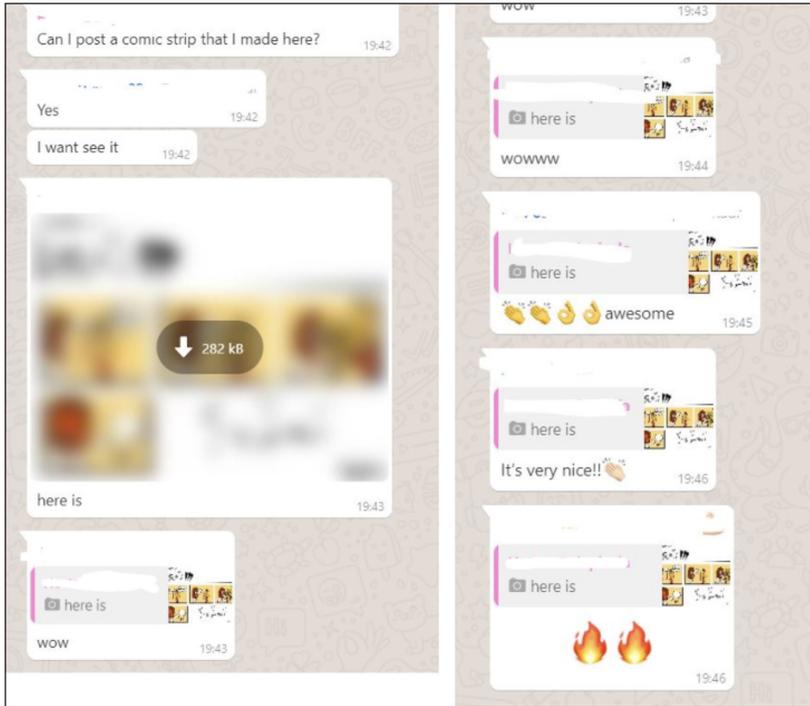
4.1. Social engagement

The analysis of the WhatsApp group transcript revealed social phatic expressions like greetings (73 messages), holiday wishes (28 messages), and birthday wishes (21 messages), which helped increase students' sense of friendliness.

There was also self-disclosure of personal information in the chat, which helped them get to know each other more, and expressions of appreciation (Figure 3). Students reported that the WhatsApp group was useful for communicating and socialising with their classmates, especially when in hybrid lessons.

3. Ethical issues and parental permission: as all students are underage, all participants and their parents signed consent forms for their participation in the study.

Figure 3. Students share personal information and expressions of appreciation from their classmates



4.2. Emotional engagement

A total of 284 emojis were used in the WhatsApp group out of 846 messages sent during a school year (September-June). The convenient use of emojis and GIFs also helped with emotional expression and added some fun to the conversation.

Students in general reported that they had the feeling they had learned and improved their speaking and writing skills, although four of them mentioned that they did not find much difference between using WhatsApp and writing on a piece of paper. They saw these tasks as the same, using a different tool.

Thirteen out of 14 students sent their speaking audio recordings directly to their teacher, who gave them oral feedback using a voice-recorded message. Students reported during the focus group that they felt less embarrassed when sending their speaking tasks using WhatsApp directly to the teacher because they were on their own and nobody in class was listening. Some stated they did not like

how their voice sounded; others reported that they did not want their classmates to notice if they made mistakes. Contrary to what some studies show (Han & Keskin, 2016), WhatsApp does not always reduce anxiety when speaking.

According to the focus group discussion and the results of the surveys, the WhatsApp group helped students create a sense of group and connectivity and improved awareness of peer presence. The teacher's participation in the group and her attempt to use this application in an academic setting were well-received by the students.

5. Conclusions

The present study provided an insight into how social and emotional engagement develops in an EFL for young learners class WhatsApp group. The WhatsApp group established a friendly and interactive environment, and students had a strong sense of belonging within the community. WhatsApp special features helped promote social interaction and allowed students to share positive and negative emotions through emojis and GIFs.

WhatsApp provided all students, including those who did not fully engage, with communicative opportunities. However, further research with a larger number of students and in different contexts is needed.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Intelligent CALL, granular systems and learner data: short papers from EUROCALL 2022
Edited by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, Branislav Bédi, Linda Bradley, Kolbrún Friðriksdóttir, Hólmfríður Garðarsdóttir, Sylvie Thoučsny, and Matthew James Whelpton

Publication date: 2022/12/12

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Cover photo by © 2022 Kristinn Ingvarsson (photo is taken inside Veröld – House of Vigdís)
Cover layout by © 2022 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-38372-015-7 (PDF, colour)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2022.