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# Feedback and Mobile Instant Messaging: Using WhatsApp as a Feedback Tool in EFL

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Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) has developed and gained importance over the years in foreign language learning settings. However, mobile phones are still perceived as distracting devices in most of the schools. Within the field of second and foreign language learning, one of the most difficult things for school teachers is to give feedback to students when using a mobile device. In the present paper we present a case study research, which will investigate the best form of giving feedback via WhatsApp to students in primary education. Mobile instant messaging (MIM) has been used to practice vocabulary as well as the speaking and listening skills, but the study focuses on the feedback that the students have received. 30 primary (volunteer) students were selected to participate in the 3-week study and were divided into 3 groups, according to their age (low, middle and upper primary). A mixed approach method was employed to analyze the data (quantitative and qualitative). Results indicated that the most popular form of feedback among young students were smileys and images and not written feedback, and the study reveals that a set of varied images, even to send corrective feedback was an engaging element for the young students. Upper-primary students considered the written feedback more interesting, since they received more language-related details with this type of feedback than with a simple image.

Keywords: feedback, MIM, WhatsApp English language learning, EFL, earning

## INTRODUCTION

The term *technology* has brought in new connotations in 21st century population and society, as it has changed people's lives and transformed their way of communicating to each other. Until today, there have been constant efforts to integrate technology

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efficiently in our daily lives and this has led to a deep impact on education, politics, our way of getting jobs and even on our welfare. Modern technology developments are no longer tight to computers, but they go beyond a fixed space and time. The features of the computer have been implemented in all sorts of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets (Han & Keskin, 2016 ), which triggered a drastic change in way learners relate to the temporal and spatial learning environments. They are no longer supposed to be tight to a physical location, on the contrary they can learn outside the classroom, while waiting for the bus, travelling or being at home. Thus, learners have changed their relationship with the learning setting and there has been a shift from the conventional computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in-class activities to a more student-centred approach. The learner becomes autonomous, responsible and an active participator in the teaching-learning process, being the creator of the digital content outside and inside the classroom. Learning is no longer dependent on the desktop computers, as students can use their wireless mobile devices, such as smartphones or tablets in order to access the lessons or the content sent by the teacher.

The use of technology in education has changed the way in which teachers deliver the lessons. The sentence "Open your book, read and answer these questions" has gradually disappeared in schools. With the support of technology in the English foreign language (EFL) classroom and the development of new teaching methods, educational systems in countries around the world are being renewed and improved Luaran, Sardi, Aziz, & Alias, 2015); and more importantly, in some under-developed countries, due to technology, children in rural schools have the opportunity to study with updated material and books.

The use of mobile devices inside and outside the classroom is attracting more and more children and teenagers, even though most of them do not even own one. For this reason, many researchers have investigated ways of integrating them in various learning contexts, leading to a considerable amount of experiments on mobile learning. As a proof stands Burston's (2013) 345 selection of annotated bibliography of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) of implementation studies between 1994 and 2012. He carried out an extensive review of the main MALL implementation studies in scientific journals, conference proceedings, project reports, and academic dissertations in order to offer an insight into the role M-learning as played in various educational contexts.

A recent large-scale analysis of the empirical research on the use of mobile devices as tools in educational interventions published in peer-reviewed journals carried out by Sung et al. (2016) revealed that the overall effect (a moderate effect size of 0.523; according to Cohen & Holliday (1996, 1982); Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, (2011) , any value that falls between -0.5 to -0.3 or +0.3 to +0.5 is said to have a moderate positive or negative correlation, and any value between -0.3 to -0.1 or +0.1 to +0.3 is considered to have a weak positive or negative correlation. A low correlation coefficient of 0 or less ±0.1 corresponds to no effect on the dependent variable, and therefore the relationship between the two variables is weak or non-existent) of using mobile devices in education is higher than using desktop computers or not using mobile devices at all. The effects

vary depending on the combination of hardware, software, duration of the intervention, users' age, settings, teaching methods and subjects. Thus, the use of handhelds was considered more beneficial than the use of laptops, and usage in inquiry-oriented learning was perceived as more effective than the usage along with lectures, self-directed study, cooperative learning and game-based learning. Traditional educational environments were found to be less beneficial than informal educational settings. As far as the duration of the intervention is concerned, medium- and short-term interventions were preferred over long-term ones (Sung et al. (2016: 265) .

At first sight, this type of technology may seem preposterous and not suitable to be applied in educational environments, as children can be tempted to play and easily get distracted from the task they are supposed to do. However, since this is a technological device that students use on a regular basis, teachers and educators should consider incorporating it into the teaching-learning process in order to shift learners' perspective upon the usage of these devices. Students should gradually perceive it as an educational tool rather than an entertaining one. Providing feedback via mobile devices is another pending task that both teachers and learners should incorporate into the teaching-learning process. Students need to be consciously aware of their progress and if their performance is in line with the requirements of the task. As in the in-class activities, immediate and delayed feedback is an essential element of the teaching-learning process. Learners may need feedback on their errors when they are not able to discover the difference between their interlanguage and the target language. Form-focused instruction aids learners to pay conscious attention to form in the input and thus may help interlanguage development (Muhsin, 2016) .

Thus, the overall objective of this research study is to find the most appropriate type of feedback model for young students when delivered via WhatsApp. The study aims to investigate to what extent the type of feedback used by the teacher at primary education level is appropriate and suitable for this age range when using WhatsApp as a teaching-learning tool. It is assumed that students prefer written feedback over WhatsApp since a written feedback note gives more information to the learner, nevertheless, no research has been published in this specific topic.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of mobile devices such as laptops, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, smartphones, e-books readers and personal computers (PCs) have been gradually introduced into educational contexts over the past 20 years. They have become an effective learning tool inside and outside the classroom, i.e. in both traditional classrooms and outdoor informal learning (Sung et al., 2016) ). These tools have attracted both students and teachers due to their versatility, portability and wireless communication, which make them usable anytime and from any part of the world. At the same time, they provide remote connection from outside a traditional classroom, which makes them even more attractive in distance learning settings, informal language learning, and to promote innovation in education with the use of information technology (IT). As follows, the benefits of mobile assisted language learning (MALL) and mobile instant messaging (MIM) will be discussed in order to frame the current research study.

**Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)**

Computer and mobile learning have been widely investigated in the last years, focusing on various areas of second and foreign language learning and teaching. Both CALL and MALL appear generally to be positive, however, there are also studies that state the opposite. A meta-analysis of 13 studies published between 2008 and 2015 conducted by Taj, Ali, Sipra, & Ahmad (2017) reveal that MALL fosters EFL instruction, revealing mainly positive results on vocabulary acquisition. The impact of taking photos using mobile phones on English phrase-learning performance has also been investigated by Liu & Chen (2015) in a college in Central Taiwan. They sought to investigate the daily encounters with newly acquired phrases using of photos taken with the mobile phones, which were associated with the sentences they constructed. The findings revealed positive results, as the students in the experimental group showed a significant higher level of perception towards the phrase-learning activities compared with the ones in the control group.

Mobile technologies are believed to promote innovative teaching methods such as cooperative learning at elementary school level. Besides, they also increase EFL reading motivation (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2007), stimulate learning outside the classroom (Liu, Lin, Tsai, & Paas, 2012), and promote game-based learning on mobile platforms (Klopfer, Sheldon, Perry, & Chen, 2012). As for foreign language learning, they help develop skills such as reading comprehension (Hsu, Hwang, & Chang, 2013; Khubyari & Narafshan, 2016), vocabulary learning and enhancement by means of vocabulary game-based applications (Huang & Huang, 2015; Lee, 2014) , including idiomatic expressions and collocations (Amer, 2010), and pronunciation, listening and conversation (Anaraki, 2009). MALL studies have focused mainly on L2 (second/foreign language) reading, writing, speaking and vocabulary development. A study carried out by Ahn & Lee (2016) analysed the user experience of a mobile-based learning system that is enhanced by speech recognition technology for the improvement of EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' speaking performance. As for the development of writing, Andujar (2016) reports that especially WhatsApp seems to be an effective education tool in increasing accuracy in EFL writing. Even though the overall view of MALL studies is positive and there are several benefits mentioned when mobile phones are used inside and outside the classroom, there are also researchers that account for some disadvantages of m-learning. One counterpart in a language class that depends completely on the mobile devices could be that the teacher may adopt a passive role in the classroom. This should not be a desired attitude, as Hayati, Jalilifar, & Mashhadi (2013) alleges because the instructors should be the real source of input and motivation for the students. Moreover, Stockwell & Hubbard (2013) state various physical and pedagogical issues with m-learning, such as battery life, processor speech or task design limitations when using mobile devices.

**Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)**

There has been a growing interest in the last years to deliver materials with mobile devices to the learner while on the move. Given that the mobile devices have wireless connection, this practice has become more and more popular in the m-learning

environment. Before having access to the recent Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) applications, such as WhatsApp, Line, Viber, etc, a recurrent practice among researchers and practitioners was to use Short Message Service (SMS) as a pedagogical tool to transmit and receive learning and information contents (Hayati et al., 2013) (). Digital communication between groups of students and between students and teachers has become popular during the last decade through various channels: email, SMS, Facebook groups, Twitter, and recently over WhatsApp ((Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). According to (Kadirire (2007), any chat could be used as an m-learning tool, but when it comes to student interaction with commercial chats versus mobile chats, learners prefer the latter instead of chats on social networks for learning. Moreover, Bere (2012) states that in his study students prefer to use WhatsApp instead of the Blackboard learning environments for Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL).

Another study collected the main features of fifteen commercial chats from different platforms and devices, such as Facebook, Gmail WebChat, Parachat, Line, Skype, WhatsApp Messenger, Google Hangouts App, Viber, SpotBros App and Atutor, in order to analyse if they could be used in learning environments. They concluded that the chats which better fit to learning environments are WhatsApp and Parachat. They also mention that there are some chats which should not be used in learning environments, such as Facebook or Hangouts because they present important accessibility barriers. Moreover, chats such as: WhatsApp, Line or Parachat have some accessibility features that allow a better use of the chat for people with disabilities. WhatsApp, on the other hand, allows blocking private windows and Parachat allows personalizing the format of the received and sent messages (Calvo, Arbiol, & Iglesias, 2014, p. 258).

Nevertheless, some teachers seem to feel uncomfortable with the non-academic and social discourse (Doering, Lewis, Veletsianos, & Nichols-Besel, 2008) (), as they pointed out that MIM has a negative impact on academic writing as students begin to overlook vowels and punctuation (Sweeny, 2010). A comparison of the common social media and instant messaging tools in education, in a form of a smartphone or mobile device application, is described by Bouhnik & Deshen (2014, pp.220) . They describe the characteristics of various social media tools in educational settings, considering aspects such as cost, accessibility, information about user availability, the possibility of opening a group for discussion and adding or removing people from a group, the possibility of having a fluent conversation as a group, privacy, teachers usage in private life, students usage in private life, collaborative learning and sharing content. All these characteristics are analysed per each social media network or application in order to offer an insight into the possibility of using them as efficiently as possible in different learning contexts.

Lately, the high infiltration of smartphones into the market has initiated a growing use of WhatsApp as a communication platform for various student groups, and more recently for groups of teachers and their students. This took place especially at high schools and university level, as young learners do not normally have an easy access to smartphones, because of their age. Instead young learners use their relatives' devices in order to be in contact with their classmates or teachers or other types of mobile devices, such as

tablets. This was also the case of the students who participated in this study, as they needed their parents' smartphones to complete the activities required by the researcher.

Since WhatsApp is relatively a new phenomenon used in the EFL se, there is not much research regarding its influence on interpersonal communication in general, and between teachers and their students in particular ((Church & de Oliveira, 2013). It is difficult to find studies in which teachers try to provide feedback via WhatsApp in different ways and to know which kind of feedback is the most appropriate for primary level students. An examination of the use of WhatsApp in a South African university class registered positive feedback from students who claimed that it was an easier way to communicate with their teachers and the rest of the class. They stated that it was productive in an informal environment where students could learn intimately and authentically, and that it was also fun (Rambe & Bere, 2013). Overall, WhatsApp has become a very popular platform that enhances and eases accessibility, encourages cooperation, and increases motivation so that learners take an active part in academic assignments.

Another study examined the use of WhatsApp as a tool to increase motivation while reading English texts among a group of Spanish students who were studying an English Studies Bachelor's degree. The results were encouraging and positive, as they reported a rise in motivation and enthusiasm for reading in a foreign language, and participants considered that personalised, direct feedback was one of the most important elements of the experience for them (Gutiérrez-Colón et al., 2013) ( . This research advocated that teachers needed an independent platform different from WhatsApp, to send all the text messages and exercises automatically in order to set a specific schedule and avoid saturation.

Likewise, Bouhnik & Deshen (2014) advocate that although WhatsApp is a relatively new tool in education, has similar positive characteristics with previous technological tools that are currently implemented. Additionally, WhatsApp has up-to-date features that encourage both teachers and students to use it in order to enhance understanding. They also state that there are also a variety of advantages, from an academic point of view, such as: quick accessibility to learning materials and the possibility of learning anytime and anywhere. The ability to access information, content, support, and personal aid on a regular basis, regardless of the physical presence of a teacher in class, can potentially enhance the learning process. Despite all these, there are also drawbacks when using this tool, for example: the improper use of language and reliance of teacher's help without trying hard enough independently.

However, not all the studies reported positive results. For example, in Kuwait, the use of instant and text messaging has a negative effect upon formal writing skills in the mainstream schools. The negative impact of this practice has been reported mainly in the case of spelling, grammar and vocabulary. The use of these technologies is believed to affect the use of English language through the overuse of abbreviations, clippings, acronyms and other abbreviated forms which are ungrammatical and incorrect. This may lead to oversimplicity and to the establishing of incorrect habits when using English (Salem, 2013). Although this study has reported negative effects of instant and text messaging, further quantitative data is needed in order to support these claims, given

that the study employed a qualitative approach with interviews in order to test the formal writing skills of Kuwaiti learners. Moreover, the author has not reported the type of questions and the procedure he employed in order to reach those conclusions.

Several studies have investigated the usefulness of instant and text messaging tools, such as WhatsApp, in the foreign language learning class. Thus, this research study seeks not only to evaluate the quality of the communication between teachers and students in the WhatsApp groups, but also to evaluate the private conversations between the users in order to analyse the personalised type of feedback learners receive from their teachers and how effective it is for different age ranges (from 5 to 12-year-olds).

## METHOD

In the current case study, a mixed-research approach was employed, being both a qualitative and quantitative design project. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989), defined the mixed-research methods designs as ''those that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words)'' (p. 256), and in this study, this method has been selected to develop and use strategies for "collecting, analyzing, and interpreting multiple types of quantitative and qualitative data" (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007), since the number of participants is small, and they are exceptionally young: for these two reasons, we believe that this method is the most appropriate to analyse the data gathered.

The data were gathered in the form of a questionnaire, which was further analysed both quantitatively (from questions 1 to 4) and qualitatively (from question 5 to 7). In order to assure the validity of results, even though the students belonged to different schools and two different year of studies, the researcher/teacher created the same kind of activities for all the group of students.

The participants were 30 volunteer students ($N$=30) from various primary education schools located in Tarragona (Spain). The experiment took place for 3 weeks. They were divided into three different groups according to their age: 10 students from low-primary level (5-7 years old); 10 students from middle-primary level (8-10 years old); 10 students from upper-primary level (10-12 years old).

Their proficiency level of English was low or very low (A1 or A1+ according to CEFR), as most of them were learning English only at school. Only 2 low-primary students mentioned they were going to extracurricular English classes once a week and they were playing and singing songs in English. 3 students from middle-primary level and 3 students from upper-primary level were going to extracurricular classes to an English academy once a week. However, none of them had a high level of English or above their age.

All the students and their families were previously informed about the aim of the study and the total confidentiality and protection of their personal data. The parents were asked personally of they agree with the participation of their children in the study and they were told that their children's names and personal details will be used for research purposes only and will not be made public.

All the students received via WhatsApp the link of a ten-minute video that they could watch on YouTube. The video showed the story of "*The wolf and the seven little goats*" by Frans Timmermans. The decision to incoporate this video was made so the children could understand the story easily with the help of the images, sound and subtitles. The students were asked to watch the video on their mobile phones (at home), so they started using the tool from the very beginning of the task by using YouTube, which is a versatile program, that can be watched on any mobile device (mobile phones, tablets, Pc, etc). The video was the same for the three levels, but the questions and activities changed according to their age.The activities for low-primary level students were shorter and simpler than for the rest of the students, as the difficulty increased according to their level. In this way, the method of the *tiered task* ((Tomlinson, 1995) was used here to adapt to the level of the students: they received the same video with the same content, but the difficulty of the tasks and the assignments increased with their age. After they watched the video, students had to answer different types of comprehension activities related to the video, such as: true/false, multiple choice questions and at the end, they had to answer with a short sentence. Students had to answer the listening comprehension activities using WhatsApp. After carrying out each activity, students received feedback from the teacher over WhatsApp. For each activity the feedback was presented in three different ways: in the form of smileys, in the form of images and in the form of regular text messages.

**Data Gathering**

After all the students received the feedback from the teacher, they were asked to answer a brief questionnaire on Google Forms using their mobile phones. In this questionnaire, they were asked to reply to seven questions, expressing their opinions in relation to the type of feedback they received. Before starting the questionnaire, all the questions were translated into Spanish and Catalan to their families to avoid any possible misunderstandings. The researcher/teacher also told the parents that they could help their children in writing down their answers because the focus of the study was on the content of their answers and not on the form. The answers to questions 1 to 4 were analysed quantitatively and the answers to questions 5 to 7 were analysed qualitatively.

**FINDINGS**

In order to make a clear difference between students' age levels, the presentation of the results is divided into three groups (low-primary level, middle-primary level and upper-primary level). To make the results more visual and understanding, bar charts were created for the quantitative answers, and brief summaries with the explanations of students' answers for the qualitative ones.

**Low-Primary Level**

The findings for the first group of students revealed the following. 60% of the low-primary students showed a special interest on smiley faces as a form of feedback and 40 % on images, as they found them more attractive and entertaining. None of the students showed any interest in the written feedback. When asked about the kind of feedback they preferred for the multiple-choice questions, 80% of the students expressed a

genuine agreement in that smileys were the preferred option. 20% of them liked the idea of receiving the feedback with images, but it is clear from the results that none of them preferred receiving written or another kind of feedback. Moreover, when asked about their preference when receiving feedback for the true/false questions over WhatsApp, 67% stated they prefer the smiley faces and 33% the images. None of them mentioned they would prefer to receive the feedback in the form of texts or other formats. As for the fourth questions, learners stated that preferred to receive the feedback with the help of images (70%) and only 30% preferred the smileys. This is surprising comparing these results with the previous ones, as they lean more towards the feedback in the form of pictures than smiley faces. However, their answers are in line with their previous results, given that none of them prefer to receive feedback in written formats.

As for the qualitative part of the questionnaire, questions 5 to 8 seek to analyse learners' interests in terms of the type of feedback used and the aspects that are mostly attracted by when one form of feedback is used over another one. Thus, question 5 (5. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with smileys?) looked into the aspect that students liked the most when receiving feedback over WhatsApp in the form of smiley faces. Students said that smileys were easy to read and understand and that they love smiley faces. One of the students from 2nd grade explicitly mentioned he loves smiley faces and he asked for more ("*I love els iconos del whatsap, més please*"-I love WhatsApp smileys, more please).

The sixth questions dealt with students' most liked aspect when they received the feedback from the teacher with images (6. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with images?). Students replied that this kind of feedback was very comprehensive, but also very attractive. They also mentioned that they particularly liked the pictures in the images, and they did not pay too much attention to the message.

They were also asked about what they liked the most from the written feedback (7. - Which aspect do you like the most from the written feedback?). Children did not like this kind of feedback and it was less attractive than the other two options. The last question delved into whether they would prefer doing these types of activities over WhatsApp or continue with the traditional types of exercises at school (8.- Would you like to continue doing these kinds of activities through WhatsApp or would you rather do it at school? Why?) The answers for this question were encouraging, as students showed a lot of interest and motivation to continue working on different topics using WhatsApp as a pedagogical method outside the classroom. They also mentioned they enjoyed watching the video individually and pause it whenever they wanted to, as well as doing the activities at home and with the help of their mobile devices.

**Middle-Primary Level**

The answers gathered from the middle-primary level students showed similar results with the low-primary level ones. The results revealed that 60% preferred receiving feedback with smiley faces and 30% with images. Only 10% of the students chose text as their favourite kind of feedback over WhatsApp. Additionally, 73% of students preferred smileys as a way of receiving feedback instead of images (27%) for the

multiple-choice questions. None of the students chose to receive feedback with the help of written texts or other formats. The results to the third question show similar preferences. 70% of the students preferred smiley faces when receiving feedback, 30 % chose images and none of the students chose the written or other formats. The fourth question revealed contradictory results in comparison to the previous questions. 40% of the students preferred receiving feedback with smileys when it comes to short answer questions and 30% preferred receiving images, but also written feedback. It should be noted that this is the highest percentage students showed preference for written feedback, in comparison to the previous results.

As for the qualitative part of the questionnaire, students' answers to the fifth question (5. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with smileys?) were not homogenous, as some of them found the feedback with smiley faces easy to understand and fast to read, but others found them just funny and quite simplistic. As for the aspect that they liked the most when receiving feedback through images (6. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with images?), students mentioned that images were cool and not common, but they would prefer something different. In addition, they said that using always the same image was boring. One of the students proposed the use of a GIF, which could be a more entertaining option, but which requires a better Internet connection.

Concerning the written feedback (7. - Which aspect do you like the most from the written feedback?), students liked this kind of feedback, as they considered it clear and very individualized. However, if there were a lot of activities, the feedback would have to be more global and general, because giving and preparing written feedback is time-consuming for the teachers, but also for the students to read it. When asked if they would like to continue doing these kinds of activities over WhatsApp (8.- Would you like to continue doing these kinds of activities through WhatsApp or would you rather do it at school? Why?), the middle-primary level learners agreed with the low-primary level students. They considered that doing activities through WhatsApp was a motivating, time-saving and appealing practice for them. They thought it gave them freedom to do their homework or work on their lessons any time before the deadline, and more importantly, they said that they did not need a table or a pencil, and they could answer in the bus, in the car, or wherever they wanted to. One student even said that if he could do his homework using this tool, he would have more time to play football. He even requested more activities via WhatsApp and less worksheets for homework.

**Upper-Primary Level**

When it comes to the upper-primary level students, half of the students preferred smiley faces as a way of receiving feedback over WhatsApp from their teacher. 30% of the students preferred the images and only 20% preferred the written feedback. It should be noted that the percentage of preference for the written feedback increased considerably for this age range. When asked about the type of feedback preferred when obtaining the feedback for the multiple-choice questions, 82% of the upper-primary students stated they liked the smiley faces. The results were very similar to the ones obtained from the middle-primary level group.18% mentioned they preferred the images and none of the

students chose the text option. Similar results have been found when asked about the type of feedback chose in the case of true/false questions. 60% chose the smileys and 40% the images with no students having chosen the written type of feedback. When it comes to their preference in the case of the short answer questions, 40% preferred the feedback in the form of text. This shows that they need a clear and precise feedback when it comes to long answer questions instead of just smiley faces or images. However, 30% of the students still preferred either the feedback in the form of images or smileys. It can be noted that the tendency of their choices in comparison to previous results and their age could have played an important role here. The older they get, the more they tend to choose the written and explicit feedback for the short answers they were supposed to write down.

The qualitative analysis of upper-primary students' answers is summarized below. First, they mentioned they liked the feedback received with smiley faces (5. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with smileys?) because it was easy to comprehend and there was no need to download anything. They also found the smileys entertaining and enjoyable. However, one student said that he did not consider the smileys a way of providing feedback. He mentioned that adding a tick or a cross next to the answer would give similar information. In other words, there was no need to provide this kind of feedback through WhatsApp when it is possible to incorporate a simple sign next to the correct or incorrect answer and the student can easily check his performance.

When asked about the preferred aspects when receiving feedback in the form of images (6. - Which aspect do you like the most from the feedback with images?), they replied that even though the pictures were motivating and appealing, sending out the same images repeatedly could be repetitive and boring. One of the students suggested that the teacher could search or create new images to indicate to what degree the answers were correct (i.e. Good – Great – Amazing), in order to motivate them and to give them extra information about the level of correctness of the exercises. Another student mentioned that the image was easy and fast to download, which means that it is important to consider sending low or medium quality images in order to ease students' access to them in case they have low Internet connection.

As regards the written feedback (7. - Which aspect do you like the most from the written feedback?), upper-primary level students found it easy to understand, but too long and it took them too much time to read the entire feedback for an entire set of activities. One student suggested the possibility of using only two to five words to give this kind of feedback. When asked if they preferred continuing doing these types of activities using the mobile phone and WhatsApp (8.- Would you like to continue doing these kinds of activities through WhatsApp or would you rather do it at school? Why?), they stated they enjoyed doing these activities, especially being at home with their family and having the opportunity to share their learning or asking for help when they needed it. A student specified he preferred working on these activities from home, with his own mobile device in order to be able to stop and play the video whenever he wanted to, to read the subtitles from an adequate distance and to watch the video in a better quality.

**DISCUSSION**

In this research it was assumed that students of all ages would prefer the written feedback, as it gives more detailed feedback and can be read all the times needed to understand the message. The results show that it all depends on the age, but in general they prefer images and the youngest students, smileys. Low-primary students stated they do not understand fully the written feedback provided by the teacher (even it was written regarding their age and level of language), but instead they preferred more visual forms of feedback, such as smiley faces and images. Their preference could be explained in relation to their age and proficiency levels: As they are young learners, they enjoy more visual forms than written texts and the lack of understanding would also make them not appreciate the written feedback.

However, the middle-primary level students showed more interest in the written feedback, when it comes to the short answer questions. They also enjoy an individualized and personalized type of feedback. This could be related to a better understanding of the written English. Nevertheless, they also mentioned that receiving this kind of feedback regularly could require a lot of time and they felt that it was too dull at times. For this reason, they suggested a more global written feedback for the entire group and not one comment per activity.

In contrast with the other two groups, the upper-primary level students expressed a lot more interest in the written feedback. Nonetheless, they suggested some changes to improve this kind of feedback, for example using less words (between 2-5 words), in order to make it even more understandable and less tedious. When it comes to the short answer questions, the majority preferred the written format and not the smileys or the images because they felt they need a more detailed explanation of their scores and performance.

Given that not all the students considered the written format an appropriate form of feedback, it can be stated that the first hypothesis cannot be fully supported: it is directly related to the age. Students from 5-7 years old do not want written feedback. Students from 8 to 10 like receiving images as well as very short written texts. Students within the range of 10 to 12 years, prefer receiving written texts with some images. The results also show that students were more attracted by the visual feature of the feedback and not by the simplicity of its comprehension.

The second assumption of the study was that both low-level and middle-level primary students would prefer the use of pictures and smiley faces instead of the written feedback, as it is more visual and easier to understand than the texts. Based on the results obtained, we can consider this hypothesis valid, as both groups of students showed their preference for the visual forms of feedback.

Even though students had the option of choosing other ways of feedback, they decided not to choose the "others" option. Some of them suggested some changes or improvements, such as using GIFs instead of regular images in order to avoid the same smiley faces for correct or incorrect answers, shorten the written feedback or sending low and medium quality images for low Internet connection, for no connection to wireless or the home Internet.

The study also aimed to investigate the reasons why students prefer receiving the feedback in form of either smileys, images or written texts and if there was a significant difference in their responses depending on their age group. According to the qualitative data investigated, low-level primary students state that out of the three types of feedback, they prefer smileys the most, as they are the easiest to understand and they loved receiving this type of feedback from their teacher. They also enjoyed receiving images, but they did not like the written texts, as they considered them too demanding to read and understand them for their level and age.

Middle-level primary students considered smileys faster to read, and easier to understand than any other type of feedback. They found them funny and simple. This group of students found images cool and not common in other class activities, but they stated the images were too repetitive. They even proposed the use of GIFs instead of regular images. As for the written feedback, students believed that this form of feedback was very clear to them, since it was very detailed and personalized.

Upper-level primary students' answers were quite discordant in relation to their opinions of smileys to give feedback. Half of the group said that they were interesting, but the other half did not consider them relevant. Some of the students even mentioned they found them too childish and there was no difference between a simple tick and a smiley face. They found the images motivating and appealing, but they also suggested that using always the same type of images was boring and repetitive. A student suggested sending a different image depending on the level of correctness or even a grade. They found the written feedback too tiring because the texts were too long. One student suggested that they should be shorter (up to 5 words per feedback).

## CONCLUSION

This research study has revealed essential information in relation to learners' preferences when receiving feedback over WhatsApp. Thus, it adds relevance to the current field of research in the area of MALL and MIM, providing meaningful data for EFL teachers who aim to use the mobile devices as pedagogical tools outside the classroom.

The findings showed that smileys and images are generally the most well-received forms of feedback among all the groups of learners. Having a lot of variations in the form of saying "you are right" or "you are wrong" with different graphics and visuals makes this practice motivating for them because they consider them some sort of prize and that encourages them to continue working and learning. Additionally, students admitted that even if they were wrong and they still received smileys, they felt better than receiving an image with a big red cross or a text message saying how wrong they were.

As for the use of images, students enjoyed them, but they prefer a wider variety and more meaningful images or pictures. They stated it was not enough to receive a "well done" and a happy face picture, but instead they came up with interesting suggestions, such as creating their own feedback images, or sending GIFs, which seem to be amusing and appealing to them.

Finally, the written feedback was not received positively by low and middle-primary level students. They consider the written comments too serious and they even perceived them as a means of punishment for their wrong answers. For this reason, this type of feedback should be further on investigated in order to find the appropriate balance between useful and appealing for these young learners. However, the upper-primary level students seemed to disagree with their younger peers. They value and consider useful this form of feedback because it was more precise, and it gave more information about the errors they produced. It was also more personalized and competitive, because they had the chance to share their results with the rest of their classmates.

The three groups state that the use of the mobile phone out of class and specifically the use of WhatsApp as a learning tool is motivating and engaging since, according to their answers, it allows them to have more free time to play.

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