

***Whatsapp* and English Language Learning: Students' Experiences during the Pandemic in Pakistan¹**

Rashid Muhammad² & Annamalai Nagaletchimee³, Universiti Sains Malaysia⁴, Georgetown, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Abstract

In response to the lockdown and closure of all academic institutions in Pakistan generally and particularly in Bahawalpur, the college teachers were directed by the Higher Education Department to initiate online teaching through *Whatsapp*, *Zoom*, *Google Meet*, *YouTube* and other educational applications. The purpose of this article is to understand the voices of undergraduates towards social media in general, and *Whatsapp* in particular during the COVID-19 crisis in terms of English language learning since few studies have focused on the educational potential of *Whatsapp* during pandemic in Pakistan. To reach the aim of this research, a mixed-method research approach was adopted, including a survey and interview to collect data. We surveyed approximately 510 students from various classes at Bachelor of Science (BS) level using *Google Forms*. These participants were recruited through convenient sampling. A total of 415 students returned the completed questionnaire. The survey revealed a positive relationship between social media and learning of the English language during the pandemic. The adoption of social media, particularly *Whatsapp* facilitated students with individual and active learning, a competitive environment, interactivity, critical thinking, problem solving, and discussion. The themes that emerged from the interviews suggest that *Whatsapp* served as a platform to transform conventional English language learning, offer multimedia resources and incidental English language learning. The study suggested that the implementation of *Whatsapp* was a worthwhile attempt since it yielded fruitful results even during the pandemic.

Resumen

En respuesta al bloqueo y cierre de todas las instituciones académicas en Pakistán en general y particularmente en Bahawalpur, el Departamento de Educación Superior ordenó a los profesores universitarios que iniciaran la enseñanza en línea a través de *Whatsapp*, *Zoom*, *Google Meet*, *YouTube* y otras aplicaciones educativas. El propósito de este artículo es comprender las voces de los estudiantes universitarios hacia las redes sociales en general y *Whatsapp* en particular durante la crisis de COVID-19 en términos del aprendizaje del idioma inglés, ya que pocos estudios se han centrado en el potencial educativo de *Whatsapp* durante la pandemia en Pakistán. Para alcanzar el objetivo de esta investigación, se adoptó un enfoque de investigación de método mixto, que incluye una encuesta y una entrevista para recopilar datos. Encuestamos a aproximadamente 510 estudiantes de varias clases a nivel de Licenciatura en Ciencias (BS) utilizando Formularios de Google. Estos participantes fueron reclutados a través de un muestreo conveniente. Un total de 415 estudiantes devolvieron el cuestionario completo. La encuesta reveló una relación positiva entre las redes sociales y el aprendizaje del idioma inglés durante la pandemia. La adopción de las redes sociales, particularmente *Whatsapp*, facilitó a los estudiantes un aprendizaje individual y activo, un entorno competitivo, interactividad, pensamiento crítico, resolución de problemas y discusión. Los temas que surgieron de las entrevistas sugieren que *Whatsapp* sirvió como una plataforma para transformar el aprendizaje convencional del idioma inglés, ofrecer recursos multimedia y aprendizaje incidental del idioma inglés. El estudio sugirió que la implementación de *Whatsapp* fue un intento que valió la pena ya que arrojó resultados fructíferos incluso durante la pandemia.

Introduction

COVID-19 affected the world with unprecedented changes in all aspects of life, including education. Educational systems worldwide experienced a massive jolt with the implementation of social distancing and limitation of face-to-face learning to curb the spread of this disease (Gonzalez et al., 2020). This massive outbreak painted a bleak picture for both the students and teachers in educational institutions (Aucejo et al., 2020). About 600 million students were affected worldwide by the closure of educational institutes (Goyal, 2020). Consequently, it dramatically transformed face-to-face education into online learning by stopping all physical activities and forming new normality in education (Tesar, 2020).

This research was conducted in response to the pandemic in Pakistan. All academic institutions, schools, colleges, and universities in Pakistan were closed on 13 March, 2020. After a month of closure, attempts were made to teach undergraduates with *Whatsapp*, *YouTube* and other educational applications such as *Zoom*, *Google Meet* and *WebEx*. According to (Zheng et al., 2018) it is impossible to have a mature and planned teaching approach during times of emergency. This is due to a number of unresolved issues related

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²mrashidkfc8712@gmail.com, rashid99@student.usm.my, 0000-0001-8459-5870

³naga@usm.my, 0000-0002-8600-5624

⁴School of Distance Education

to the lack of materials, infrastructure, and teachers, and students' lack of digital competence which, according to (Ilomäki et al., 2011) is the most recent concept describing technology-related skills (Crawford et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). During the pandemic, face-to-face learning practices were halted between educators and students (Sintema, 2020). For this reason, students and educators faced difficulties in interacting and collaborating on matters related to teaching and learning practices. In this situation, the use of technology tools seemed pertinent because minimalizing the transactional distance (psychological or geographical distance between the learner and teacher) enhanced learning experiences that would lead to positive learning outcomes (Naciri et al., 2020).

Since smartphones among college students have become increasingly ubiquitous (Kim et al., 2019), *Whatsapp* has become very popular among students (Zheng et al., 2018). *Whatsapp* differs from *Twitter* and *Zoom* in many features and it has become popular among students in Pakistan and the world. It was frequently used before the pandemic as shown in various studies, to enhance the reading and writing skills of undergraduates (Justina, 2016), to build better teacher-learner relation and interaction (Peeters, 2018), and to improve the vocabulary of students (Çetinkaya & Sütçü, 2018; Jafari & Chalak, 2016). However, the use of *Whatsapp* for academic purposes in Pakistan was very limited. There are a few studies that address only the perception of students towards social media in general, including *Whatsapp* before the pandemic. For example, Shahid (2018) found that students were more frequent users of *Whatsapp* than professionals. Buriro et al. (2021) reported on the use of *Whatsapp* for academic as well as social purposes through a survey of higher education institutes. Contrarily, there are a few studies such as (Ali et al., 2021) and (Shahid & Shaikh, 2019) that reported the formal use of *Whatsapp* for teaching English language. However, there is a little existing literature on the potential of *Whatsapp* during emergencies in Pakistan and it has been unsure how *Whatsapp* can enhance English language learning. It, therefore, seemed vital to investigate the potential of *Whatsapp* for teaching and learning of English language during the pandemic days in Pakistan when face-to-face interaction between students and teachers was not possible.

The pandemic disrupted and challenged the well-established conventional approaches to learning and teaching. To keep in touch with learning, Pakistan EFL learners were encouraged by their class teachers to choose any one of the various technological tools such as *YouTube*, *Whatsapp*, *Zoom*, *Google Meet*, and *WebEx* to learn English. With this in mind, the researcher attempted to shed light on how students viewed the adoption of *Whatsapp* for the English language learning during this pandemic period when both the teacher and student experienced 'educational inertia.' Thus, the present research set out to answer the following research questions:

1. *What were the views of undergraduates towards social media as learning tools during the pandemic?*
2. *What were the views of undergraduates towards Whatsapp as an English language learning tool during the pandemic?*

Literature Review

A large number of research inquiries indicate that various types of technologies and tools of social media have facilitated ESL students' learning of the English language. Evidence from the literature shows various technologies and social media tools have been employed in different EFL settings (Justina, 2016; Peeters, 2018; Zheng et al., 2018).

Since students and teachers have been using social media frequently in educational institutions, revolutionary changes in the teaching and learning mechanisms have been seen (Lenhart et al., 2019). The internet has made it possible for the Millennials who rely on the internet for the solutions to their problems) and other habitual users of media to be connected to the whole world with various social media tools like *Facebook*, *Whatsapp*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *Wikis*, *Blogs*, *Instant messaging*, and live chat.

In this way, social media have become an essential part of the new generation's lifestyle. A few recent studies during the pandemic have also indicated that there has been a significant increase in the use of social media resulting in a high rate of social media addiction (Cinelli et al., 2020; Haman, 2020; Jomezai et al., 2021). Jha et al. (2019) for example, suggest that most students have a prominent presence on social media like *Facebook*. The online access between these students is not merely for chatting but also for professional benefits. Existing research provides positive perspectives regarding social media sites and demonstrates that social media can be an appropriate source to optimize learning and assist teachers in professional and academic matters (Arif & Kanwal, 2016; Sultana, 2016). This is because social media can harness meaningful and engaging activities like knowledge sharing, creativity, collaboration, and interaction (Khan et al., 2020). With these benefits, social media has also flourished and its positive impact on learning

of English language has been documented. However, the potential of social media tools for teaching English language in the absence of face-to-face instruction during the pandemic seems to have been little explored. Pre-pandemic studies, for example, Barrot (2021), reported a positive correlation between a *Facebook* portfolio and ESL learner writing performance. To this end, the researcher recruited L2 English learners from four classes into two groups, the treatment and control groups. Using quantitative and qualitative approaches, the findings revealed that students in the intervention group outperformed those in the control group. The results were attributed to different features of *Facebook* such as interactivity, flexibility, and accessibility. Similarly, Wongsa and Son (2022) examined the effect of drama-based activities and *Facebook* on Thai secondary school students' English-speaking skills. Results showed that drama-based activities and *Facebook* had a positive impact on learners' speaking skills. They also reported that students' motivation to learn the English language also increased. Moreover, these drama-based activities and *Facebook* provided them with an interactive and flexible learning environment to communicate and collaborate with their tutors and peers.

Other studies did literature reviews on the impact of *Facebook* as a mediating tool to develop writing skills in EFL (Klimova & Pikhart, 2020). Using the world's largest databases, *Web of Science & Scopus*, the findings showed *Facebook* resulted in an improvement in writing skills. The review study also suggested that *Facebook* positively affected students' motivation, and collaboration, improved vocabulary, reduced their shyness, and helped them shape and organise ideas. Similarly, Al Qunayeer (2020) created a *Facebook* group to observe the learners' comments/interactions on their peers' review posts with a focus on their reflections on their experience. The findings revealed that online collaboration between teacher and students and between students and students does occur not merely in activities, but also in facilitating social relations among the learners. It also argues that *Facebook* could be used in distance learning courses to lessen alienation among the students.

Ulla and Perales (2020) found *Facebook* to be effective in the Thai context, both in and out of classroom for speaking, comprehension, and conversation-like writing practices that enhanced students' engagement in language tasks. Likewise, Aloraini (2018) found *Instagram* helpful among Saudi EFL students. The quantitative study analysis revealed that teachers' vocabulary lessons posted on *Instagram* elicited more responses from students. On the contrary, in terms of quality, students demonstrated poor output quality for both vocabulary and grammar-related posts. More recently, Abdulaziz Al Fadda (2020) also investigated the comparative impact of *Instagram* and *Snapchat* on learning English. The study argued that *Instagram* was more effective in engaging and learning of English language than *Snapchat*; it facilitates interaction and promotes practical knowledge.

A more recent pre-pandemic study, Rahaded et al. (2020), reported that using *Whatsapp* in the learning process yielded positive outcomes such as sharing knowledge, preparation for class, class participation, and students' desire to take extra lessons. Khan et al. (2020) found that university-level students positively perceived *Whatsapp* in learning language. They found that *Whatsapp* allows English language learners to interact informally with their teachers and peers. The findings revealed that the students produced meaningful messages that surpassed the expectations regarding elaboration and length of communication. Recently, Akkara et al. (2020) examined the impact of *Whatsapp* interaction on L2 learners' speaking skills. Using qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study yielded positive results in students' speaking skills in terms of fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range, accuracy, and pronunciation. The study also indicated a considerable change in students' perception regarding *Whatsapp* as a mediating tool for interaction and informal learning.

However, criticism and reservations about adopting social media in learning continue to be debated in various learning contexts. Some of these issues are related to the appropriateness of the platform for academic purposes, internet access issues, privacy, and this eventually led to a negative impact on academic achievement and performance (Abbas et al., 2019; Kausar & Awan, 2019; Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Rabia et al., 2019; Waqas et al., 2016). Thus, there have been mixed findings on the use of social media in the educational context.

These findings were reached during the pre-COVID era, and limited studies were published on social media and *Whatsapp* during the pandemic. Since online learning became mandatory, educators were left with formal and informal platforms to continue their teaching during the lockdowns. An attempt to understand how *Whatsapp* enhances pedagogical practices may improve the selection of relevant multimedia and technology tools to improve online teaching and learning practices.

Theoretical underpinning

Social media is aligned with Social Constructivist Pedagogies (Willems et al., 2018), it seems pertinent that it also be used in the present study which is theoretically grounded in the Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) propounded by Vygotsky (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), especially related to mediation, scaffolding, and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Kaoropthai et al. (2019) defined scaffolding in education as a process in which a teacher or more knowledgeable peer helps in improving learning or facilitating the mastery of tasks.

Mediation holds the central position in Vygotskyian (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) theory. This occurs with the support of different tools, such as language, writing instruments, books, computers, and mobiles. In the present study mobile technology (*Whatsapp*) is used as mediation, since face-to-face learning was stopped due to the pandemic. Vygotsky proposed that learning at the individual level takes place within the ZPD which is defined as a learning space in which the learners need help and support from others to move to a higher level of performance (Hsieh, 2020). In the present study, the more knowledgeable, either teacher or peer, is supposed to help the less knowledgeable through the *Whatsapp* platform as various tasks are performed during the learning process.

In the present state of teaching practices, educators and researchers are strongly in favour of constructivism which engages learners and improves their learning outcomes (Saini & Abraham, 2019). Social media are theoretically linked to student-centred pedagogies and conceptually related with constructivism which recognises learning not as a passive process, but as an interactive one that provides learners with an opportunity to construct meaning through cognitive, interpretive, and social behaviours (Spender, 1996). Since, learner-centred pedagogies have been significant for a long within the post-secondary education (Biggs & Tang, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), using technology, therefore, is a way to move away from teacher-centered approaches (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) to learner-centered ones for productive results .

Method

A mixed-methods research approach was employed in this study. This method allows the collection of quantitative and qualitative data that give a rich and detailed picture of the reality of the practical situation investigated (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Therefore, a survey and interview were used to gather data.

Population and participants

The 510 participants in this study were from ten Bachelor of Science (BS) classes enrolled in different semesters in ten various departments in a public sector graduate school. In all these departments, English is a compulsory course that aims to improve students' reading and writing skills. All these students were recruited and sent an online questionnaire and consent form after they were engaged in an online class through *Whatsapp* or any other social media or educational tool such as *YouTube* or *Zoom*. Thus, the study adopted convenience sampling. The students who participated in this study had Android mobiles, and access to the internet. The participants were both male and female, from 18 – 20 years of age, and with different first languages such as Punjabi, Saraiki and Urdu. Almost all the participants used *Whatsapp* as a social media tool to share messages, pictures, emoji, text and videos. The principal researcher, a permanent faculty member, with 14 years of teaching experience, contacted the participants through the classroom teacher using *Whatsapp*. Though the researcher himself taught English to various classes during the pandemic in the absence of face-to-face teaching, he was not directly in contact with the respondents since he engaged another teacher from the same institute to help him in this study.

Research procedure

The online teaching reported in this study lasted five months daily, according to the class timetable; it, of course was carried out online since the educational institutes were closed. Teachers were free to change their class time if needed. The students were also allowed to discuss with the teacher and fellow students after attending their online class. All BS classes in the second and third semesters were required to study critical reading and composition.

For reading skills, the lecturer first taught different reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and so on using *Whatsapp*. The lecturer shared the audio lecture and different other short clips on reading strategies downloaded from *YouTube* on the *Whatsapp* platform and later reading worksheets were also used. These worksheets consisted of a passage and questions related to reading methods including inference, skimming, and scanning. The students worked on these sheets and on completion, returned them to the teacher. The teacher corrected these worksheets and returned them to the students with feedback. A similar procedure was followed to practice other reading strategies.

So far as writing skill was concerned, students were required to learn how to write descriptive and argumentative forms of essays using different methods of developing ideas like listing, mind mapping, and brainstorming. They also needed to learn how to write the topic, thesis statement, supporting sentences and conclusion using suitable cohesive devices. The lecturer engaged students on *Whatsapp* in developing ideas on different descriptive and argumentative topics. After gathering ideas, PDF versions on how to write the introduction, supporting sentences, and conclusion were given to the students. As far as cohesive devices are concerned, they were first taught and then the most frequent transitional signals used in different orders of information such as chronological order, comparison and contrast order, stages of a process and problem-solution pattern were shared. Finally, students produced their draft, handwritten or in *Word* format, on already brainstormed topics and sent them to their teachers, who returned them after feedback.

Instrument for data collection

A questionnaire based on Bashori, (2018) and Hussain et al., (2018) was adapted and modified according to the requirement. Bashori's (2018) questionnaire originally consisted of a five-point Likert scale, with a total of sixteen items on the use of technology for learning English skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing; Hussain et al.'s (2018) questionnaire consisted of forty-three items related to social media and its educational role. These were adapted, keeping in view the study's objectives and making the questionnaire somewhat simpler for the participants. Only those items that were relevant to research questions and objectives of the study were chosen to be modified and used accordingly. So, the researcher prepared a questionnaire consisting of ten items. The questionnaire presented a Cronbach's α .731, above the lower acceptable limit. The students had been already briefed about the objectives of the study through the respected course lecturers. With their help, *Whatsapp* groups were created for data collection. A total of 510 participants were sent a structural questionnaire and consent form link using *Google Forms* to fill it out as early as convenient for them within a week. Only 415 students responded within the prescribed period. Thus, 81% response rate was recorded. The purpose of this questionnaire was to answer both the research questions: the experiences of the learners during the pandemic regarding their learning through social media in general, and *Whatsapp* in particular.

To further highlight the quantitative findings with qualitative ones, a structured interview was conducted to record the views of the learners who used *Whatsapp* during the pandemic. A total of 40 students who experienced *Whatsapp* learning agreed to participate in the interview. However, only 20 voluntary participants were selected to keep the amount of data manageable. There were eight questions (see Appendix 1) prepared for collecting students' views and telephonic interviews were conducted since the students were still in lockdown. The whole telephonic interview session lasted for one hour and forty minutes and the interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Urdu. Later, the researcher with the help of another teacher with fifteen years' experience of teaching and research replaced Urdu terms with English and transcribed interviews verbatim.

The six Steps Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the categorization of emerging themes in this study. The steps followed were familiarization the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. Two coders were trained to categorize the data which were coded independently. The resolution of categories that were coded differently was done through discussion. Cohen kappa inter-coder reliability was 0.7 for a positive experience and 0.8 for a negative experience.

The data analysis procedure

To present the participants' perspectives in terms of descriptive statistics percentages, the data was coded into SPSS software which was run for further analysis. For qualitative data, the thematic analysis developed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed. For this purpose, first the data were transcribed and then coded by independent coders whose reliability was already ensured.

Findings

The data collected was through an online questionnaire that was designed to answer the first and second research questions simultaneously: "What are the views of undergraduates towards social media as learning tools during the pandemic? What are the views of undergraduates towards *Whatsapp* as an English language learning tool during a pandemic when educational institutions are closed?" The findings, drawn from the data analysis, have been presented in Tables below (see Tables 1 & 2).

Undergraduates' views regarding social media tools during COVID 19

In the following paragraphs, students' views regarding the use of social media for learning English during COVID 19 have been represented quantitatively.

Table 1 illustrates that students actively participated in the learning process through interaction with their peers and instructor. The findings indicated that 68.66% of students said that social media was helpful in increasing peer interaction and 70.35% of the undergraduates acknowledged the role of social media in increasing students and teachers' interaction during the lockdown. The highest number of students (82%) agreed that social media was helpful in promoting the exchange of information and it promoted opportunities of discussion among the students significantly (76%). Apart from peer interaction and student-teacher interaction, social media was found useful in promoting student-content interaction. It also offered opportunities for teamwork. Moreover, social media promoted self-learning and active learning. In addition, the learners felt that their learning autonomy increased (74.69% of students agreed) while learning English through social media tools. Respondents agreed that social media was an instant source of knowledge (70%).

Statement: Social media tools promote...	Level of agreement Frequencies and percentages				
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Peer interaction	178 (42.89)	110 (26.50)	12 (2.89)	56 (13.49)	59 (14.21)
Facilitates student-teacher interaction	207 (49.87)	45 (10.84)	17 (4.9)	33 (7.95)	113(27.22)
Exchange of information	140 (33.73)	200 (48.19)	13 (3.13)	55 (13.25)	07 (1.68)
Opportunities of discussion	212 (51.08)	101 (24.33)	9 (2.16)	78 (18.79)	15 (3.61)
Student-content interaction	145 (34.93)	198 (47.71)	20 (4.81)	12 (2.89)	40 (9.63)
Opportunities of teamwork	175 (42.16)	140 (33.73)	13 (3.13)	10 (2.40)	77 (18.55)
Self-learning	166 (40.00)	120 (28.91)	15 (3.61)	40 (9.63)	74 (17.83)
Active learning	165 (39.75)	130 (31.32)	25 (6.02)	60 (14.45)	35 (8.43)
Learner-autonomy	203 (48.91)	123 (29.63)	20 (4.8)	40 (9.63)	29 (6.98)
Instant access to knowledge	180 (43.37)	110 (26.50)	17 (4.09)	47(11.32)	60(14.45)

Table 1: The perspectives of undergraduates about the advantages of social media in terms of learning.

Since the course contents of the BS second semester were related to reading and writing components of the English language, 74.69% of the respondents (Table 2) acknowledged the potential of *Whatsapp* in terms of reading and writing skill practice. Since *Whatsapp* facilitated students reading practice in the form of reading sheets and writing practice in terms of writing tasks, they acknowledged its potential. It also facilitated the learning of grammar when teacher offered them corrective feedback. A large number of respondents (72.04%) were of the view that *Whatsapp* provided them with the opportunity for discussion, similarly, 68.18% of the college undergraduates said that learning English through *Whatsapp* was an enjoyable activity and felt that their creativity had increased (58.3%). It was further asserted by (53.97%) that as an instructional tool, *Whatsapp* increased their critical thinking.

Statement: During the pandemic <i>Whatsapp</i> ...	Level of agreement Frequencies and percentages				
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Proved a better source to learn English grammar.	175(42.16)	188 (45.30)	9 (2.16)	38 (9.15)	5 (1.20)
Improved my academic performance through discussion.	87 (20.96)	196 (47.22)	13 (3.13)	67 (16.14)	52 (12.53)
Helped me practice reading and writing skills better.	213(51.32)	97 (23.37)	32 (7.71)	63 (15.18)	10 (2.40)
Made English learning more enjoyable.	87 (20.96)	196 (47.22)	23 (5.54)	83 (20)	26 (6.26)
Improved my critical thinking.	55 (13.25)	169(40.72)	67(16.4)	86 (20.72)	38 (9.15)
Increased my creativity.	165(39.75)	77 (18.55)	13 (3.13)	69 (16.62)	91 (21.92)

Table 2: The views of undergraduates about the usefulness of *Whatsapp* in terms of learning English during pandemic when educational institutions were closed

Students' views regarding Whatsapp as an educational tool during pandemic

In the following paragraphs, students' views regarding *Whatsapp* as an educational tool have been represented qualitatively.

The quantitative data is further triangulated with the emerging themes from the qualitative data. These excerpts offer insight into their experiences on *Whatsapp* and support the quantitative items related to

Whatsapp use for English language learning. The three positive themes that emerged are: (1) *Whatsapp* as a platform to transform conventional English language learning (2) using multimedia resources, and (3) incidental English language learning.

Whatsapp as platform to transform the conventional English language learning

The qualitative data revealed that *Whatsapp* seemed to be an appropriate virtual platform to conduct the English proficiency course. One student participant (SP) reported that “*the pandemic had disrupted their learning practices.* (SP4)

And others commented

Whatsapp for learning is a good tool since students are stuck at home in this pandemic, and Whatsapp seems to help me to learn the English course. (SP3)

Whatsapp is a more convenient platform and easy to interact with teachers and friends about the English language proficiency course. (SP3)

One of the activities students participated in during their online classes was sharing worksheets on reading and writing that they completed on their own and returned through *Whatsapp* platform. While working on these worksheets, they were required to read passages and answer questions using different reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning and inference. They also completed the writing tasks such as describing their university or their favourite place. During these activities, they interacted with their teacher and classmates through mediating tools such as *Whatsapp* more freely than when pre-pandemic, they had interacted face-to-face. These interactive and collaborative activities to complete reading and writing tasks during pandemic supported their language learning.

Students had varied comments including that it was a “fast and convenient app to share knowledge” (SP5) or “Students can create study groups” (SP10) and it can be used “to communicate announcements related to the institute”. (SP12) They also commented that *Whatsapp* allowed them to “easily ask teachers questions and it is an easy way to talk with each other.” (SP15)

Furthermore, SP 5 said, “since everyone uses [*Whatsapp*] and it is so common, and these things make it more valuable than other apps” Another (SP3) suggested that “it was reliable source of communication and a safe tool to transfer data. We often have privacy reservations, but *Whatsapp* is as secure as one wants. Learning English is a lengthy process, during this pandemic, *Whatsapp* has been a good source to make this process happen frequently and smoothly”.

Since *Whatsapp* is a common social media tool among college students in Pakistan, as compared to other social media tools such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, etc, they found it to be a better platform for interaction with students and teachers because everyone could easily use it.

Students reported that they were able to interact with their friends and peers on matters related to their language course via *Whatsapp* due to low cost of the packages. One explained that they were able to

Arrange their group work task via Whatsapp [and] the Internet packages are very low cost, and it can save our documents and text and voice mail. (SP6)

The students’ positive views about *Whatsapp* for English language learning are due to its potential to provide communication and interaction, which is no less appealing than conventional classroom teaching. Some students highlighted that the flexibility of time and space allowed them to learn at their own convenience. . The following quote summarizes the students’ comments:

I think Whatsapp is a great platform for learning the English language during a pandemic. Everything is organized, it's easy to discuss the topic and to know other's views about a topic being discussed. There is no time restriction for learning on Whatsapp. Because when we miss the lectures in the classroom, we are not able to understand the main concepts being delivered, but on Whatsapp, whenever we are free, we can learn them and listen to them again and again. (SP 15)

One student said that he replayed the video posted by the lecturer many times in a conscious attempt to understand and gain a better understanding of his English language learning. SP13 admitted that:

It's really good for me to learn the English language using social media in these COVID-19 days. I understand everything easily. When I am confused, I watched the video lecture again and again until I got satisfied.

Similarly, SP4 had positive views about *Whatsapp* and said that:

I like Whatsapp to learn English during pandemic because it is the best medium for learning a language and improves our learning skills. It is the best way and easy way for learning the English language.

SP5 also stated that

Whatsapp is good to learn English. It is much better than other tools learning English. We feel comfortable while taking lectures via Whatsapp. We get notes in Whatsapp. We get save and useful lectures on Whatsapp. Whenever we need to study, I open Whatsapp and get notes easily.

Multimedia Resources

Students realized that they were able to access a number of multimedia resources during the online lessons with their lecturers since various teachers employed different tools for interaction with students and shared learning material from different sources (SP12, SP14, SP19 and SP20). *Whatsapp* provides various information from various sources and media format that makes learning more realistic. It brings life in their discussion related to English language learning, and SP19 said:

I can easily share any problem with my teacher and fellows. I like this app because it has a lot of properties such as sharing documents, audio-video calls, pictures, voice notes and docs.

Multimedia resources contribute to a different learning experience and different learning formats, and it appeals to audio and visual learners. SP 17 said,

What I like most about using Whatsapp to learn English during the pandemic, is the voice recording lecture to learn English during pandemic (SP17)

In addition to that, it also benefits kinaesthetic learners. SP9 reported that they were engaging in creating things for the English language. This allows them to retain what they have learned and moved away from the passive realm of learning to active learning via digital pedagogies. For example, multiple respondents highlighted that:

I think Whatsapp helps us a lot to improve our English language because all the stuff in Whatsapp is in the English language. Besides this, I watch videos (shared by students or teacher) having subtitles, and it helps me to get the main point. And my learning skills are getting better. I like using Whatsapp to learn English during pandemic I like voice recording lectures to learn English during pandemic. (SP17)

Whatsapp enabled us to send photos, audios and documents. Also, it provided the opportunity to create study groups, and we can easily talk or discuss our ideas and doubts. We can discuss anything using this app as it is a fast and convenient application. (SP12)

By listening to the audio lectures, as well as lectures in the form of video on Whatsapp, it helps me to improve my reading skills. (SP14)

Incidental English language learning

Incidental learning which refers to unintentional learning that takes place from other activities or completing a specific task (Kelly, 2012) is evident during students' use of *Whatsapp* during the pandemic. Their primary activities include posting articles, videos, and materials because they do not have any other communication options. The students reported that their grammar and vocabulary improved because they had been assigned various tasks such as reading and writing activities on social media platforms. Improvement in vocabulary and grammar seemed to be by-product of using *Whatsapp* platform. This is because "we share every kind of information on Whatsapp which could help us in English language skills" (SP1) as well as "vocabulary, spelling, and grammar" (SP2)

Their primary activities of exchanging ideas and knowledge to complete their tasks solely depended on virtual interaction, which involved messaging. This indirectly enhanced their writing skills. In the interviews, some of the students stated that " *Whatsapp is good for writing skills through text chat and assignment writing*" (SP6 and "by writing different articles, essays and paragraphs I had found a big change in my writing skills" (SP19). SP13 said that "in *Whatsapp*, when the teacher shares some kind of news, articles or questionnaire, we can comment and post our reviews in English. So, in this way, we can improve our grammar and vocabulary" (SP13). The participants reported that they were more confident in speaking, reading, and writing in English since they were frequently practicing these skills in the virtual environment. SP3 said that " *Whatsapp makes us more confident in speaking or writing in English since talking and chatting our friends in English*" (SP3). SP15 also commented that:

Whatsapp is a good tool for learning. Using Whatsapp for English language learning gives students the confidence to improve their English language knowledge with enthusiasm during the pandemic, and enhances the four language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Discussion

Both the quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that social media in general and *Whatsapp*, in particular, were potential tools for English language learning during the pandemic in Pakistan. The learners reported that social media was helpful in learning reading and writing in the absence of face-to-face learning.

They also found social media useful for interactivity with the peers, content, and teachers that it helped them in their studies. Moreover, they reported that learning with *Whatsapp* and other platforms such as *YouTube* and *Zoom* during the pandemic was fun. They enjoyed learning autonomy, active learning, discussions, self-learning, and instant access to knowledge. Finally, the students reported that their critical thinking and creativity also increased due to reading and writing activities through worksheets shared on *Whatsapp* platform. This study found evidence in support of the idea that *Whatsapp* can serve as a pedagogical component that allows students to continue learning during abnormal circumstances. These positive experiences reflect the idea that social media such as *Whatsapp* can be useful tools for users (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014). For example, in this study, *Whatsapp* was used for teaching and learning activities to complete a task and prepare for the examination. Students in this study were able to transfer their learning activities and demonstrate an easy and convenient learning environment and thus attest to the aptness of *Whatsapp* as a virtual platform for English language learning. The idea of using *Whatsapp* also boosted students' confidence in language learning.

Students pointed out that *Whatsapp* provided them the resources to expand, enhance, and learn with their peers. The interactions in this study are consistent with "friending Vygotsky" (Churcher et al., 2014) which imply the co-construction of knowledge which is based on the Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development which provides the more knowledgeable with opportunities to help the less knowledgeable (Vygotsky, 1978). The more knowledgeable peers and teachers helped the less knowledgeable via social media tools. Harrison (2013) stated that the 'teacher' role is common in a virtual learning environment where the lack of teacher existence virtually may prompt other users to enact it.

The students' positive experience with *Whatsapp* in language learning also originated in their incidental learning (Kelly, 2012). This implies that *Whatsapp* can enhance learners' writing skills, as it is evident from their posts and comments on *Whatsapp* platform, as learners are indirectly engaged in self-correction to ensure their writing conveys appropriate meaning. Such experiences can be associated with the Learning by doing principle and seemed to be effective and "sticks" better compared to any other approach in language learning (Reese, 2011). The participants were engaged in producing 'oralised written texts' (Yus, 2011, p.19), and through these practices, they were able to enhance their writing skills in English. These findings are congruous with Bani-Hani et al.'s (2014) findings that students tend to help their peers earning grammar and vocabulary on social media platforms.

The *Whatsapp* group approach provided the students with opportunities for constructive discussion to complete their task, and that their informal chats were meaningful and connected with English language learning. The findings also highlighted the potential of *Whatsapp* in developing reading and writing skills. This shows how social media sites like *Whatsapp* can advance the field of language teaching even in new circumstances like the pandemic. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature regarding the use of social media in improving four components (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) of the English language (Arani, 2018). *Whatsapp* provided interaction at a distance between students and -instructors. The fast and easy access to students and teachers made *Whatsapp* a suitable tool for learning and developing interaction, reflecting on the previous in studies, such as Batawi (2019), Lee & Huang (2018), and Robles et al. (2019). Students' positive experiences further improved their interest in the content (Justina, 2016). The exchange of various resources (learning materials) on the *Whatsapp* platform during reading practice and writing tasks developed critical skills and problem-solving approach among the students. The multimedia resources (learning content shared through multimedia) provided an interactive learning environment for the learners, as they enjoyed English language learning from multiple avenues. Participants reported that they shared images, audio, and video instead of just textual data on *Whatsapp*. Moreover, knowledge imparted through *Whatsapp* was internalized easily, since the participants were already accustomed to exchanging ideas with each other through this tool. These findings are congruous to Shabiralyani et al. (2015) who claimed that visual aids play a positive role in learning. The current study demonstrated that the academic use of *Whatsapp* during the pandemic provided meaningful and creative activities that improved the emotional and cognitive well-being in students. All of these results show that *Whatsapp* has the potential to be used for home-based learning during emergency situations.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Though *Whatsapp* has been reported as an effective tool to teach and learn English language in various pre-pandemic contexts in different studies (Ahmed, 2019; Bensalem, 2018; Noyan & Kocoglu, 2019), its potential to teach and learn English during the pandemic in Pakistan had been studied little. The present research has demonstrated that *Whatsapp* has potential as an academic tool that can be used to learn and teach English during emergency situations when teaching and learning activities need to take place beyond

the classroom walls. Therefore, *Whatsapp* like tools should be encouraged and incorporated with traditional pedagogy. Educators should strive to utilize social media such as *Whatsapp* to teach, initiate active learning, energize students' learning, and plan educational interventions especially when face-to-face learning is impossible. (Kukulka-Hulme, 2012). More specifically, these tools should be encouraged for student-student, student-teacher and student-content interaction, an important link for productive results in the learning of the English language. This study has demonstrated that mobile technologies such as *Whatsapp* are becoming indispensable during precarious times. *Whatsapp* is a virtual platform that can be used for many purposes, and it can integrate social and educational activities.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire prepared for collecting students' views and telephonic interviews were conducted since the students were still in lockdown

Q No 1. Tell me briefly about your experience using social media for English language learning during COVID19?

Q No 2. Do you think you improve your reading skill by using *Whatsapp* during covid 19? How / Why? Please explain with examples.

Q No 3. How do you find *Whatsapp* good for English writing skills during the pandemic?

Q No 4. Do you think *Whatsapp* is a better platform for interaction with fellows and teacher?

Q No 5. Do you think *Whatsapp* improved your academic performance during pandemic?

Q No 6. Why did you feel confident when you used *Whatsapp* for learning English during pandemic?

Q No 7. What's your perception about learning English before COVID and using *Whatsapp* platform during pandemic? How /Why?

Q No 8. How did *Whatsapp* posts/shared material help you in learning English language?