Short Research Article

WhatsApp for Educational Purposes: Exploring Omani English Language Teachers` WhatsApp Use and Corresponding Beliefs

ABSTRACT

A growing body of research accentuates the potential of adopting social media platforms, including instant messaging applications in formal learning. This study aims to explore Omani English language teachers' use of WhatsApp in their teaching as well as their perspectives regarding its use. Twelve Omani English language teachers from various government schools were interviewed a number of artifacts regarding WhatsApp use were collected. The data was analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis and focused on both the teachers' beliefs and their use of the software. The study revealed that teachers' employed WhatsApp for a number of educational purposes such as communicating with parents, improving particular language skills, promoting learning outside the classroom by providing ongoing assistance and managing their classes. In addition, WhatsApp emerged as a means of developing and maintaining a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) in the participants' professional contexts which allowed for sustained continuous professional development of the participants. The research uncovered largely positive views regarding WhatsApp use to facilitate both English language teaching and promote out-of-class learning. The participants stress the comprehensible and practical aspects of the application which facilitates both teaching and learning processes. The practical implications of these findings are to support teachers in their agentive role and allow for the bottom-up mobile technology-reliant initiatives that support achieving educational results.

Keywords: [English as Foreign Language, WhatsApp, Teacher Beliefs, Virtual Community of Practice, Information and Communication Technologies, Thematic Content Analysis]

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Statista (2019), WhatsApp messaging application is one of the most popular social media platforms with about 1.2 billion monthly active users worldwide. It serves as a web-based social platform that is free, readily downloadable, and allows its users to exchange information using different types of media including text, images, video, documents, weblinks, and audio messages (Sahu, 2014). Its key applications necessitate the connection to the internet but as of now the use of WhatsApp is free of any charges.

Although originally not designed for learners in mind, WhatsApp has entered the educational domain with learners' being able to instantly access its functions and enrich the learning process (Rambe & Chipunza, 2013).

During the Covid19 pandemic, some countries adopted WhatsApp more formally as a means to support distance learning (Susilo & Sofiarini, 2021; Ramdhani & Nandiyanto 2021). WhatsApp application is used for sharing learning and teaching materials, improving the learning process, and improving language skills. However, in many educational contexts, the challenges of using WhatsApp involve a lack of institutional or formal support which results in rather uncoordinated attempts by individual teachers and their students to augment the educational process with this application. Moreover, as some researchers suggest, students are not ready to learn actively and independently using WhatsApp (Rahmadi, 2020). In Oman, WhatsApp is informally used in certain academic settings but its use mostly revolves around facilitating communication (Jabar et al., 2020). In addition, WhatsApp use is not a common practice in Omani schools and there is little research that highlights the integration of WhatsApp application in the learning and teaching process in the Omani school.

In Omani schools, the average number of students in the classroom was reported 26 students in the academic year 2018/2019 (Oman News Agency, 2020). In some schools especially in AlBatinah North and Muscat Governorates, the number can reach 35 to 40 students particularly for grades 5 to 10. Having many students in one classroom cause a number of educational challenges for English language students and teachers. Due to short contact hours and large group sizes, students do not have sufficient opportunities to be exposed to and to practice the English language. Additionally, teachers who are tasked with teaching large classes, face many class management issues which often revolve around maintaining in-class discipline. This further deprives their students of being engaged with an adequate amount of practice and further hinders the development of students' language skills and systems.

Consequently, one of the ways some teachers choose to compensate for the wasted time is by additional engagement of the students and their parents outside of the classroom time. For a number of teachers, WhatsApp has become a tool of choice as it had already been widely used in Oman to accompany various daily activities and as a tool supporting a variety of interpersonal interactions. Nevertheless, the literature, particularly in the Gulf area, is quite scant in this regard, it is unclear how WhatsApp use and functionality is perceived by Omani English Language teachers in schools and in particular, how they use it to address the educational challenges which have been additionally aggravated by the recent COVID19 pandemic. To this end, this research sets out to explore Omani English language teachers' beliefs and use of WhatsApp in their professional practice.

The sections below continue with the presentation of insights into teacher beliefs and teacher knowledge and consider the background to the pedagogical characteristics and advantages of mobile learning.

Teachers` Beliefs and Teacher Knowledge

To define the teacher's belief, it is essential to first define what beliefs are. Sigel (as cited in Pajares, 1992) wrote that beliefs are "the mental constructs of experience often compressed and integrated into concepts." These concepts function according to Brown and Coney (as cited in Pajares, 1992) in determining and guiding behavior. Beliefs are mental constructs and Borg (2001) defined a belief as a conscious or unconscious proposition, which by nature is evaluative. Borg, who has a body of research on beliefs and teacher beliefs in particular, claims that a holder of a belief accepts it as true, hence a person holding a given belief will charge it with emotive commitment making it more likely to guide their other thoughts and actions (Borg, 2001). The term "beliefs" is also used to refer to other close terms such as opinions, ideas, and views as found in Kunt (1997) and Wang (1996). An additional challenge emerges when trying to differentiate beliefs from other close psychological terms such as knowledge (Pajares, 1992). He proposed that to make a distinction between beliefs and knowledge one has to understand beliefs as construct imbued with subjectivity and emotion whereas knowledge should be seen as more connected to facts. Table 1 summarizes the distinction between beliefs and knowledge as found in Savasci-Acikalin, 2009).

Table 1: Distinction between beliefs and knowledge

Beliefs	**Knowledge**
Refer to suppositions, commitments, and ideologies	Refers to factual propositions and the understandings that inform skilful action
Do not require a truth condition	Must satisfy "truth condition
Based on evaluation judgment	Based on objective fact
Can not be evaluated and judged	Can be evaluated and judged
Episodically stored material influenced by personal experiences or cultural and institutional sources	Stored in semantic network
static	Often changes

Characteristics of Mobile Learning

Peters (2007) views mobile learning as a type of e-learning and stressed its usefulness in providing educational services because of its flexibility. He observed that mobile learning devices offer a variety of ways to learn, communicate, and collaborate. Sharples, Taylor and Vavoula (2005) regard mobile learning as informal learning which gives the learners a sense of freedom. He argued that learners find informal learning activities more motivating than learning in the formal settings such as schools because the learners in the formal settings have less freedom in choosing tasks for their own goals. The feelings of control and ownership are regarded as important factors of motivation and mobile learning, through its ownership features offers that (Sharples et al. 2007), contributing to its educational effectiveness. Such effectiveness is stimulated further by communication which is an integral part of most of the mobile learning technologies such as mobile phones and smartphones. Communication between learners opens the opportunities for collaborative activities where the learners can become more motivated as they can engage in working with others (Crook, 2000).

Additional advantages of mobile learning devices for learners and teachers are that they are portable and small. Moreover, most mobile learning devices do not need extra accessories (Quinn, 2000) which make them readily usable. As Vavoula (2004) observed, mobile learning devices can provide continuity by transforming resources or information between different settings. In addition to the continuous flow of information, mobile learning provides instant information which means bringing information immediately when is requested (Eteokleous & Ktoridou, 2009). According to Ocak (2010). mobile learning is a blended learning method as learners are exposed to classroom instruction via face-to-face interaction and to online education via mobile learning methods. All of these define the potential of using mobile devices in educational settings.

Implementing mobile learning is influenced by various factors summarized from National Research Council (1999) as cited in (Sharples et al., 2005). The factors are:

1. Learner-centered: It is developed from students' own knowledge and skill, enabling them to think based on their previous knowledge.
2. Knowledge-centered: The learning process comes from validated knowledge that was taught inventively by using different methods.
3. Assessment-centered: The learners are assessed based on their ability and the assessment is able to offer diagnosis and further guidance.
4. Community-centered: An effective learner will form a community to share knowledge and support those who are less able in their studies.

The ways mobile learning affect teaching and learning processes have been studied across many countries and educational settings. For example, Chen and Katz (2009), Hoadley (2009), and Sung and Mayer (2012) studied the influence of mobile devices in schools and on learning. They discussed their roles and concluded that mobile devices have a positive effect on students and their learning. Other studies highlighted that using mobile phones is helpful for learning (Jacobijn Sandberg, Marinus Maris & Kaspar de Geus, 2011). Moreover, some studies found that teachers used mobile phones to help the writing skills of those with special educational needs (Swan, Hooft & Kratcoski, 2005). Regarding the implementation of mobile learning in Oman's educational institutions, there are few studies that highlight the status of mobile learning use in the country. Most of the studies deal with higher education institutions, not with public schools such as Al Hamdani (2013) and Al-Emran and Shaalan (2015).

WhatsApp is an application which by its nature necessitates the use of mobile devices and due to its popularity WhatsApp, many studies have been conducted to review its use for educational purposes. Some studies found that using the WhatsApp application is effective in improving students` learning skills (Amry, 2014; Jain, 2016; Rambe, Patient& Chipunza, 2013; Riyanto, 2013). WhatsApp's potential for supporting language learning has also been reviewed and confirmed (Alsaleem, 2013; El-Sulukiyyah, 2016; Han and Keskin ,2016: Lenhart, 2007). Since teachers are often final decision-makers regarding the use of mobile software, their beliefs regarding using WhatsApp application were also explored, with many studies accentuating positive attitudes as vectors influencing the adoption of this software to support teaching (Aburezeq & Ishtaiwa, 2013; Saiful, 2018; Suryana, Hidantikarnillah & Murwantono, 2021).

Locally, in the Omani context, using the WhatsApp application for educational purposes has also already attracted researchers' attention. For instance, Al Dughaishi (2020) found that using WhatsApp in teaching TESOL classes, positively impacts students' results while they engage in practicing communicative writing. Al-Saleem, Al-Saqri, and Al-Badri (2019) studied the use of WhatsApp among the faculty members of The Sultan Qaboos University

and they confirmed that it was employed for class discussions, processing of projects and general communication among the students and faculty. AlShekaili (2016) investigated the actual use of WhatsApp in colleges through a self-assessment questionnaire and pointed to the fact that most teachers were rather at the middle, referred to as the 'mechanical' level of using WhatsApp. Also, Alkhufiri (2019) explored the use of WhatsApp and its influence on teaching and learning English school and observed that the most typical uses were to increase student participation when practicing English, overcome problems related to their homework and provide ongoing support beyond the classroom.

Hence, the research interest in how WhatsApp is used in Oman in an educational setting has already been established. This study aims to add to the body of the literature by investigating the experience of twelve Omani school teachers who use that software. To this end, the study uses Thematic Content Analysis and zooms in on both the teachers' use and the beliefs regarding WhatsApp. The next section outlines the methodology used in the study.

2. METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants of the study were selected from AlBatinah North Governorate and non-probability convenience sampling was used to select the initial sample of six participants to obtain initial information relevant to the research questions. Higginbottom (2004) defined the convenience sampling as consisting of "participants who are readily available and easy to contact" (p. 15). After selecting the initial sample, snowball sampling - asking participants to identify others to become members (Creswell, 2012) was used to extend the sample and identify six additional participants. The selected participants from both sampling methods constituted a group of twelve Omani English language teachers who became the subjects of this research.

Instrument

The main data collection instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. The interview is regarded as one of the suitable tools to collect participants' thoughts and experiences (Litosseliti, 2010). Semi-structured interviews allow eliciting more details and explanations without fear of losing control over the flow of the interview. Furthermore, they are suitable for smaller sample sizes as in this study's case and have an agenda covering general themes (Al Sawafi, 2014). The questions of the interviews were open-ended questions in order to allow the interviewees to elaborate on the issue and involve further discussion.

There were two stages where semi-structured interviews were used. The first stage was to choose the initial participants of the study by exploring the knowledge, qualification, and experience of a group of teachers in using the WhatsApp application for educational purposes. At this stage, a group interview was conducted which included some general questions to allow the participants to reflect on their suitability and then to be included in the participant group of the study. During the second stage, semi-structured interviews were used as well to collect information from the selected participants regarding their use of the WhatsApp application for educational purposes and their beliefs about such use. At this stage, the researcher was committed to a schedule to meet with the participants. Three participants were interviewed individually face to face and the remaining ones were interviewed online due to precautions regarding Covid19.

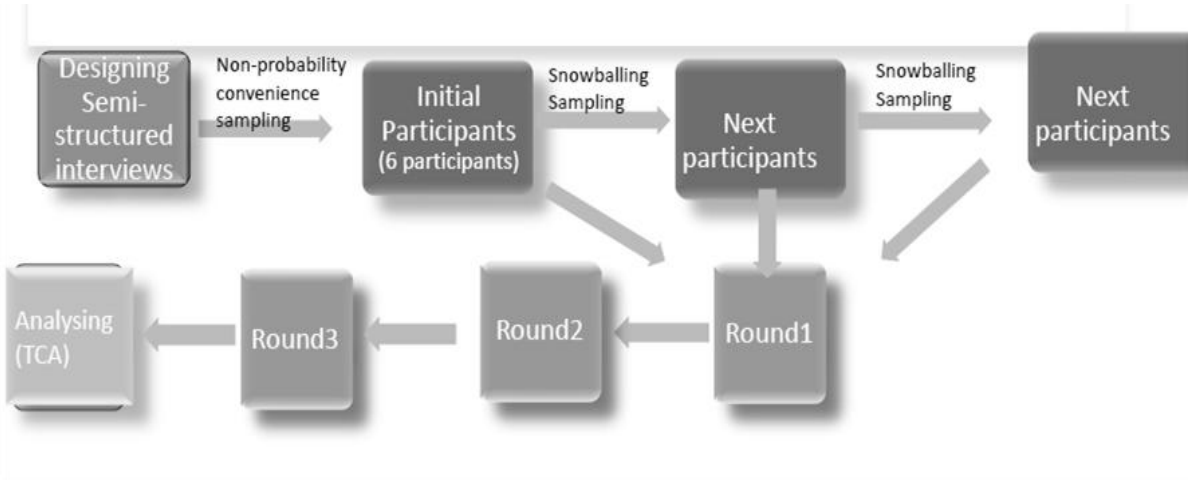
The interview's structure and questions were revised before conducting the first round with the first interviewees. The researcher referred to Seidman (2006) to develop the structure and type of questions of the interviews. After interviewing some participants, the researcher reflected on the structures and questions to improve them to ensure that questions brought useful and rich information about the topic and helped in the flow of the conversations. Moreover, the questions of the interviews were structured to enable asking the various participants the same questions to reach data saturation (Bernard, 2012). Data saturation was considered as "the point at which additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes" (Given, 2015, p. 135) where Urquhart (2012, p. 194) defined saturation as: "the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data. There are mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones." Therefore, when no new data were revealed and the same collected data are presented by the new participants, the data-collecting process was completed.

The interviews were used in several rounds in the second stage. After each round, the researcher qualified the data obtained from the preceding round and when needed, reached back to the interviewees for any explanation or justifications. This was necessary, the questions of the initial round of interviews did not tease out all the aspects of the use of the WhatsApp application for educational purposes and the participants' beliefs regarding such uses. Thus, through the engagement in the subsequent rounds, crucial ideas and information emerged. In addition, some interviews evolved into ongoing online (WhatsApp-based) discussions and the researcher used these to further develop the questions used in the subsequent rounds. This re-iterative process allowed to gather a rich set of data.

Data-Collection Procedure

Regarding the interviews, the researcher met with the interviewees individually or in groups by face-to-face or online via Zoom Program. The interviews lasted for 25 to 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded, and the participants were informed before. Anonymity and confidentiality were granted to the interviewees. As mentioned above, semi-structured interviews in the first round collected general information obtained by prepared questions and discussions with the interviews, and based on the answers, the researchers adjusted next-round questions to allow for richer data to be collected. The following rounds were conducted when the researcher decided that more aspects need to be covered as new facets of use or perspectives have emerged. The process of collecting data is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Data Collection Process



Data Analysis

The Thematic Content Analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to process the data in this study. The method was implemented throughout the whole analytical process of coding in six phases. These phases are: 1) becoming familiar with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining themes; and 6) writing up by producing the final report (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher acknowledges that coding in TCA is subjective as the interpretation of a text might vary from a researcher to another. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke, Braun and Terry (2015) confirmed that the subjectivity of the researcher is an integral aspect of the process of analysis and as such is not detrimental to obtaining valuable findings.

Qualitative research design embraces an inductive approach which involves allowing the collected data to regulate the themes (Thomas, 2006). In the first phase, the audio files were transcribed and then translated into English by the researcher himself. To assure the quality of the translation, a certified translator checked the translation to verify the translation. Next, an initial set of notes was taken based on the translated transcripts. After transcribing and translating the data, which aided the researcher in familiarizing himself with the data, each participant was presented with a copy of their interview transcript. Thus the participants had the opportunity to reflect on how the researcher presented and interpreted the data which were obtained from them, allowing them to request or suggest any adjustments- a necessary step advocated by Widodo (2014). Already during that stage, some initial codes were developed.

During the second phase, the researcher generated the initial codes by using the Microsoft Word program. Here, the whole text was revised to highlight phrases or sentences from all the different sections of the text. The new codes were kept added till all the transcripts were covered. The transcripts were revised many times to ensure that all codes were covered in all transcripts. During the third stage, more general themes were generated by reviewing and organizing the codes into broader patterns. In the fourth phase, the selected themes were reviewed to verify whether they fit represent the collected data while yielding vectors that relate to the research questions. Some themes were too broad and needed to be split into more specific sub-themes. During the fifth phase, the themes were labeled to facilitate the process of reference easier. At this stage, the themes were reviewed and their overlap was compared. The theme names were inspected for vagueness and, if necessary, modified to make the process of discussing them more streamlined and transparent. During the final phase, the report was drafted with the themes presented, discussed and their relevance

interpreted. In the final version of the report, a number of verbatim quotes interviews, and well as excerpts from the literature were added.

Ethical Considerations

Any study revealing teachers' professional actions in their own teaching contexts is political by nature and the wellbeing of the participants must be ensured by a researcher. The participants were informed of their right to refuse participation at any stage of the research. Anonymity was ensured by using letters and numerical symbols (for example, T1, T2, T3) in place of the participants' names. Any other personally identifying data has been removed from the research.

Regarding the confidentiality of the collected artifact data such as snapshots or print screens of the actual WhatsApp exchanges, the researcher recommended that the participants delete or gray out any confidential and personal information. Moreover, all the collected data from the WhatsApp group were revised by the participants to obtain their final approval before subjecting them to further analysis. Finally, in a few cases, the personal identifying data overlooked by the participants was removed by the researchers. The participants were assured that any off-record information, such as their loose comments or any remarks irrelevant to the research would be omitted from the analysis.

A consent form, which included information that enabled the participants to fully understand all the issues related to the study such as the purpose of the study, procedures, schedules, and benefits was issued, and the participants were invited to sign it.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected was analyzed subsequently presented based on the order of the study's research questions which were:

1. How do Omani English language teachers use WhatsApp in teaching/ learning process?
2. What are Omani English language teachers' beliefs regarding using WhatsApp as an educational tool?

The sampling procedure was positively biased as it favored teachers who actually decided to use WhatsApp in their practice. This was a conscious and purposeful strategy and the researcher realizes that a more complete picture regarding decisions why the application is not used or should not be used could have been obtained by extending the sample and involving teachers who choose not to use this technology. Thus, such extension can be done as a continuation of this study to yield a fuller understanding of studied issues. Also, for practical reasons, the analysis mostly relies on teachers' narrations with an element of artifact study (screenshots of WhatsApp exchanges). Thus, the congruence between teachers' beliefs and practice was not further investigated via e.g. classroom observation or document study. Nevertheless, through the process of utilizing a broadly tuned research instrument (semi-structured interviews triangulated with the collected artifacts) the researcher managed to identify also some key challenges through critical interrogating the data.

English Language Teachers' Use of WhatsApp in their Practice

Connectivism learning theory accepts that technology constitutes a key part of the learning process and that learning can take place outside the classroom and be encouraged by the use of mobile digital technologies (Guder, 2010). Teachers, while engaging in the aspects of their professional practice using WhatsApp, formed connections with both parents and other teachers and encouraged student class engagement by using this channel of social media. Naturally, students, though not directly contacted due to legal and cultural ramifications, were at the center of these connections. A result of the interactions and the connections formed and maintained, school-based language learning was extended beyond the classroom and continued at home. Learning occurred, Friesen & Lowe, (2011) observed, when the participants in the network shared opinions, viewpoints and critiques through conversation and interaction on a more mutual basis that extended the traditional teacher /student relationship. The discussion below presents the uses of WhatsApp and the emergent Community of Practice.

In reference to the main research question, the findings of the study uncovered various educational purposes of using WhatsApp. Firstly, the most prominent way was communication. In particular, the software was used for communication with parents, other teachers, and school administration. Teacher-parent communication via the WhatsApp application was established to improve the students' performance and achievements. Interestingly, teacher-parent communication via WhatsApp application was regarded as an aspect of parental involvement. Teachers uniformly reported that such involvement influenced the students' achievement and performance positively. In addition, WhatsApp was used between teachers to discuss their practice and the topics that are related to teaching and learning. Moreover, the participant teacher engaged their students in a number of assignments, both online and offline with the intention to improve particular language systems or skills, such as pronunciation or writing.

Teachers requested students' presentations to be shared via WhatsApp and assigned homework to extend the opportunity of learning at home. This was often done in a more individualized manner, by assigning tasks dependent on the student level. The intention behind requesting WhatsApp-based presentations was to lessen the stress that some, particularly female, students experienced during open-class presentations, which, in their view, deprived some students of getting impartial marks for presentations. To this end, some teachers also asked the student to send their recorded videos of their presentations via WhatsApp. Sending homework via WhatsApp was also regarded as an instance of learning beyond the classroom's borders. Teachers sent homework via WhatsApp to motivate the students to do their homework and to learn.

The participants of this study also used WhatsApp in chosen aspects of classroom management. They asserted that it was particularly useful in controlling their students' truancy and if, necessary disciplining them by immediately reporting the misbehavior to their parents. As one teacher noted, "when students know that I communicate daily with their parents, they become more disciplined'. The instant and direct communication features offered by applications as WhatsApp help in preventing more serious issues from arising by reporting them directly to the parents. As one teacher noted 'it is good to nip things in the bud'- as an early interference can keep the students on the right track. Understandably, this was a result of the direct and continuous involvement of parents in their children's educational process.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this research was that using WhatsApp served the purpose of building and maintaining what Wenger (2011) refers to as a Community of Practice (CoP). In the context of this research, the COP was in fact a Virtual Community of Practice VCoP since the studied interaction and maintaining relations occurred

predominately online via WhatsApp. Participant teachers were engaged in “online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge” (Chiu, Hsu, and Wang, 2006). According to Riel (1996), the reason behind any CoP - of which VCoP is a type - is solving existing educational issues, finding a clarification of current knowledge, or gaining new content. These aspects directly align with the opinions presented by the participants of the study.

Furthermore, teachers utilized their VCoP as a tool for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) as it enabled them to collaboratively reflect on their practices and further their teaching skills. This was exemplified by the teachers’ collaborative interaction in their subject group where they discussed their teaching-related challenges and offered suggestions to others. Also, teachers’ interaction with their supervisors offered additional opportunities such as attending events that interest them as well as teaching strategies. The Virtual Community of Practice that emerged in the study is reminiscent of the findings presented by Cansoy (2017) who examined similar interactions by science teachers via their WhatsApp group. Similarly, Li et al. (2011), confirmed that informal groups and networks encourage opportunities for information exchange strengthening knowledge and skill-building.

To sum up, this study found the teachers used particular features of WhatsApp groups to support the students' parents and indirectly shape the educational process outside of the language class. In addition, they also used it for their own development by sharing field-relevant pedagogical content knowledge, reflecting on teaching techniques and seeking and offering emotional support among other involved teachers. The next section addresses any pedagogically-relevant beliefs which accompanied the engagement with WhatsApp.

Teachers` Beliefs Regarding Using WhatsApp for Educational Purposes

For the purpose of this research, all participants were selected as they declared that they use WhatsApp as a tool that directly helps them in their teaching practice. Consequently, their negative views regarding WhatsApp use were limited as the teachers mostly focused on the positive aspects of using the application.

Participant teachers expressed a unanimous view that using WhatsApp was effective not only for teachers but also for parents and students. These beliefs regarding using WhatsApp for educational purposes were previously uncovered by Saiful (2018) who confirmed that the majority of EFL prospective teacher educators viewed using WhatsApp either by teachers or students as a useful integration. Perhaps, their chief motivation to use the application had an underlying belief that through its sustained use the teachers are able to affect students’ performance positively in a continuous manner; The participants declared that WhatsApp was a valuable teaching and learning tool that can extend learning outside the class. Teachers mentioned the types of tasks they used to send for students to study at home via their parents’ mobile phones such as pronunciation and reading activities, auxiliary materials for different levels of students, and a number of motivating speaking activities. Moreover, the participant teachers expressed the belief that the software enables the learners to access to materials without the restrictions of time or place, which is particularly valuable in case of learners missed a class.

In addition to the effectiveness of using WhatsApp as an educational tool, the participants confirmed that it is the convenience of using the application that initially fueled their decision to use it. This view strikes a chord with the Technology Acceptance Model – TAM (Lee, Kozar & Larsen, 2003) where the convenience and the ease of use dictate the actual decision to use technology. The teachers attributed WhatsApp's convenience to its

comprehensible use and the nature of the established communication. Participants revealed that the different features available in WhatsApp are convenient compared to the same features provided by special devices such as cameras, scanners, and laptops. In sum, the belief that WhatsApp has an intuitive interface and is simple to use is one of the main perspectives declared by participants of this study which guided them to the adoption of this platform.

Additional beliefs regarded the affective domain. WhatsApp mediated interactions were considered to decrease stress and increase the convenience of contact when compared to the established and more traditional means such as telephone or emails. The instant feature motivated the teachers as well as parents to use it for communicating ad-hoc needs and seeking clarification and often relieved stress before it escalated into a possible conflict. Thus, the teachers who maintained constant communication with the parents expressed contentment that the number of what they referred to as 'surprised and angry parent visits' has significantly decreased. Teachers felt that they could focus was on conducting the desired actions rather than exploring distractors within the application. Such focus is one of the main characteristics of the Activity Theory (Waycott et al., 2005) which does not only focus on identifying usability but also on examining how well the tool supports the learner's activities.

Challenges of Using WhatsApp for Educational Purposes

This investigation would not be complete without at least outline some of the emergent challenges which accompany using WhatsApp. Although the sample, as indicated above, was not chosen purposefully to study hindrances the use of WhatsApp created, the participant teachers confessed different challenges such as timing-related distraction, off-topic related issues, confidentiality, and connectivity issues.

The remaining challenges have been classified according to their nature: technical, educational and instructional. Technical challenges included the unavailability of smartphones with all students and an unnecessarily large volume of messages. Educational challenges included exposure to students' personal life, using inappropriate language, and students' high expectations of teacher availability. Instructional challenges included students' misuse of the application and students' inactivity. Some of the identified challenges corresponded to the ones found by Bouhnik, Deshen, and Gan (2014), These included issues circulating on privacy and message volume which lead to time mismanagement and the unwanted availability of teachers and a nuisance of unsolicited messages during their off-work times.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the use of WhatsApp and the accompanying beliefs among a group of twelve Omani English language teachers. The participating teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews during several rounds and a number of artifacts regarding WhatsApp use were collected. The obtained data was transcribed and translated and later analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis. The study revealed that teachers' used WhatsApp for a number of educational purposes to augment their teaching practice and increase the effectiveness of student English language learning. The main uses involved communicating with students' parents and teacher peers, improving student language skills, promoting language learning outside the classroom by providing ongoing assistance, and managing their classes. While these actions were realized, a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) was forged and maintained among the

participants. Regarding the teachers` perspectives towards using WhatsApp application to support teaching and learning, they all deemed the tool to be effective and useful for teachers, parents, and students. The participants were able to critically reflect also on the accompanying challenges such as intrusion in personal life, irrelevant or off-topic discussion, and internet connectivity issues. In conclusion, despite these challenges, in teachers' view, the benefits greatly outweigh the challenges, and their beliefs guided their actions and, in turn, their actions further shaped their beliefs to reinforce them in their resolve to continue using the tool to the benefit of their students. This exemplifies that teachers, through their resourcefulness, are able to take informal and not necessarily institutionally-supported initiatives to compensate for the inadequate teaching and learning opportunities and increase exposure to the target language with the intention to enhance language learning. Thus, it is worth considering conducting a more widespread campaign that acknowledges teacher professional agency and supports practitioners' initiatives through encouragement rather than top-down imposition. Such actions should not favor any particular tools or their uses and allow teachers to use them in semi-formal ways and within the scope left to their discretion.

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