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*empty chairs at empty tables*

# WhatsApp in the ELT Classroom: Practical, Possible and Painless

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“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

**B**ack in 2009, no one could have imagined the impact WhatsApp would have in our daily lives. Regardless if you use it to send messages, pictures, videos and even voice recordings, its potential for English Language Teaching is colossal. This article aims to discuss some practical, possible and painless applications for our classroom.

## 1. Introduction

Education in the XXI century is an ever-changing landscape of wonder and opportunity and when combined with contemporary technology, an indispensable pillar of our lives, the sky is the limit.

The current use of smartphones, mobile phones, and tablets have enabled the introduction of **m-learning**, which augments opportunities for teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Every device contains countless apps and communication apps such as WhatsApp, in particular, which may be adapted to be a unique teaching/learning tool. Some research in this area even indicates that the use of WhatsApp supersedes the traditional face-to-face tutoring in real classroom placement into long-distance learning and teaching in a virtual classroom (Hamad, 2017). The application involves vital benefits following the augmenting of the learner's writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills through text and verbal instructions. My aim with this contribution is to share my personal experience using WhatsApp with B1 English learners from the University of the Azores.

## 2. WhatsApp and ELT

As mentioned above, the use of WhatsApp in teaching English to foreign learners involves many potential advantages. By considering a popular user-friendly free app, one is able to augment students writing, listening, speaking, and reading skills expanding the English lesson experience far beyond the realms of the physical classroom.

### How?

First, by acknowledging the importance of social media and social networking in learners' lives. WhatsApp undoubtedly facilitates students' discussion, which allows them to overcome their fears of interaction when using English. According to research in this area foreign learners tend to overcome their fears online, unlike in real classroom settings or face-to-face communication. The students realise their potential and abilities through practising English online, which also boosts their confidence (Bensalem, 2018). Therefore, students via WhatsApp tend to engage in discussions confidently in English, which in turn improves their four skills. WhatsApp also encourages collaborations among students and guidance from their teachers. Short collaborative tasks requested by the English teacher, or even more complex ones like eTwinning projects, may be done via WhatsApp by integrating students from different geographic locations. The app allows for the creation of groups that encompasses students collaborating for a particular task. WhatsApp groups allow for interaction





among students and teachers through a closed space accessible to every party at any time. The platform also enhances communication by sending recorded sound and video clips, text messages, and other materials such as reading materials (Hamad, 2017). The sharing of materials in WhatsApp groups enhances connections among the participants, which in turn improves the learning of English.

WhatsApp also has the potential advantages of extending learning time. Teachers may use the app to extend learner's learning time (online) to cover the required syllabus and engage in interactive learning. The extended time may also be used for the question and answer sessions or writing and recording speeches in English (Bensalem, 2018). The students learn from their comfortable environments and favourable schedules.

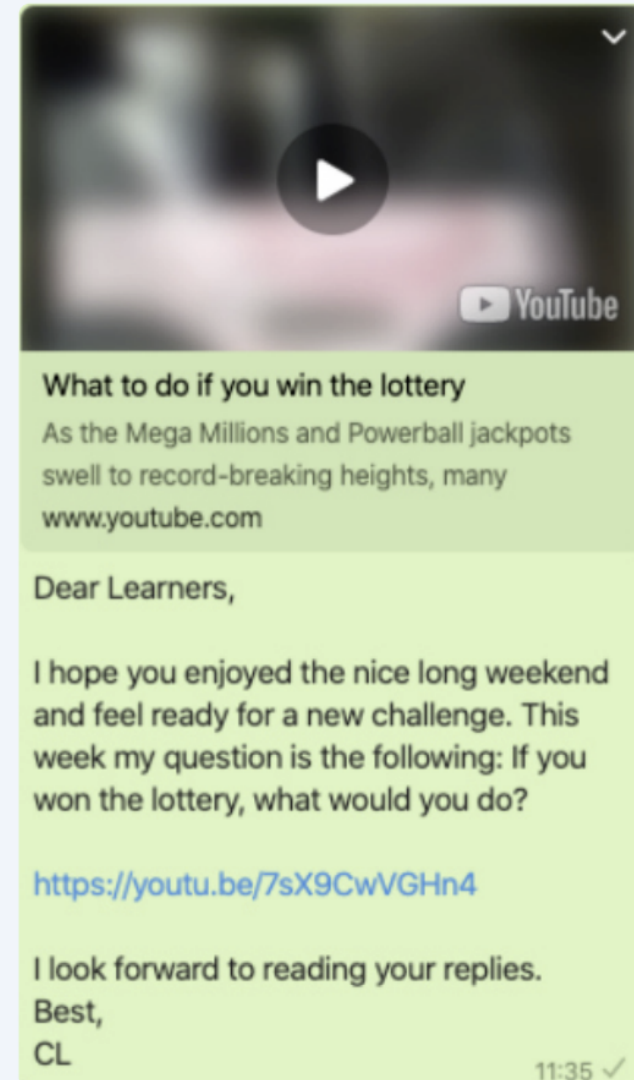
Finally, WhatsApp has advantages of learning from other students' mistakes. The students share written and recorded speeches that are used for learning. The teachers may also send materials for transcription to enhance listening skills. The students are required to listen and write word for word from speeches (Bensalem, 2018).

### 3. WhatsApp in my lessons

If you have seen one of my past APPI sessions, you know that I am a huge advocate of bridging theory and practice. While the previous section highlighted the theoretical framework, here I will briefly point out the practical side.

After setting up the group, I informed the learners that we would have a weekly challenge. The challenge would be sent in advance of each lesson in order to introduce the upcoming topic. By sharing a meaningful image, video, song or question and requesting a written or verbal comment, I was able to obtain valuable feedback.

In the beginning of each lesson we would go over the comments and feedback would be given. By highlighting specific mistakes or chunks of language, learners would learn from each other's mistakes contributing for meaningful language learning. Here is an example of a challenge:



<https://youtu.be/7sX9CwVGHn4>



Because I don't have permission from the learners, I can't openly share their replies.

Learners were also encouraged to complete and share tasks that were not completed in class, providing an important moment in the learning process. By sharing written or audio files students had the opportunity to acknowledge their peers' work, ask questions...

With smaller classes, students took turns in providing the weekly challenge and I would prepare a class around that specific challenge. By transferring power to the learners, there were no issues with attendance, motivation and/or participation. Students' feedback by the end of the academic year considered the English lessons as diverse, fun and exciting. A safe place where their opinions were relevant and respected by all. By being introduced to a topic beforehand, learners felt more confident to actively participate in the in-class activities.

#### 4. Final thoughts

Overall, WhatsApp, when used appropriately, plays an integral role in enhancing the learning of English among students. It's practical, considering it's a widely used instant messaging platform, almost impossible to avoid nowadays; it is possible because it does not require a long and complex installation process nor does it require the user to remember another login or password, and it is painless because it won't burden you like blogs or wikis sometimes do.

Today, considering the ramification of the Covid-19 outbreak and the shutdown of schools nationwide I have realised more than ever how significant enhanced web-based apps are to the educational system.

Using WhatsApp as a learning outlet has even fueled my PhD research since I've realised its potential to help learners improve their pronunciation, a skill widely neglected in the English classroom (Lindade, 2018).

If you give it a try, you won't regret it and if you do please share your experience afterwards.

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