



AN INQUIRY INTO EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHATSAPP FOR ORAL PEER ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The current global pandemic triggers English teachers to be innovative and competent in delivering teaching instructions in online classrooms. Even though Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is widely used to support online language teaching and learning, nonetheless, the integration of Mobile-Assisted Language Assessment (MALA) in speaking skills has not been immensely examined. Thus, this current study aimed to scrutinize Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp as a tool for peer assessment in an online speaking class, as well as its potential benefits and drawbacks. This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview to gain the data which were then analyzed by using phenomenological analysis. Fourteen secondary learners participated in two sessions of an online class by assessing their peers' oral performances via the WhatsApp application. In the end, they were interviewed regarding their views on the method employed to assess their oral skills. The results indicated the participants' positive perceptions towards the method along with various benefits and drawbacks they encountered during the process which were divided into technical and academic aspects. The results suggested that WhatsApp as a tool for mobile-assisted language assessment was not supposed to be perceived as a single major assessment for speaking skills, rather as an alternative to complement traditional assessments.

Keywords: mobile-assisted language assessment, WhatsApp, peer assessment, speaking proficiency, online learning

INTRODUCTION

The current situation of global pandemic triggers educational stakeholders, particularly English teachers in Indonesia, to hone their capability in conducting an online teaching and learning process due to the prohibition of a conventional or face to face classroom occurrence. Luckily, coming along with the rapid growth of the internet and technology, the ease of administering an online classroom today can be carried out. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is one form of technology that is widely used to support language teaching and learning, by applying portable and personal devices (Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, 2016). The development concept of MALL leads to the concern of language

learning via mobile devices (Samaie, Nejad, & Qaracholloo, 2016) which accommodate a new learning style. This approach serves students with manageable access to search learning resources as well as to keep in touch with their teachers and peers, anytime and anywhere.

An online learning classroom may produce the same barriers as the conventional one, that is the lack of students' active participation during the process which has been considered as a complicated academic endeavor (Rambe & Bere, 2013). Involving students in assessments within the learning process is regarded as pivotal (Vanderhoven, Raes, Montrieux, Rotsaert, & Schellens, 2015) and can be beneficial in overcoming the issue. Unfortunately, Tarighat & Khodabakhsh (2016) confirm that the integration of the MALL for language assessment has not been immensely explored. This current study conceives the term Mobile-Assisted Language Assessment (MALA) to associate the two subjects of MALL and language assessment. Peer assessment, which is considerably seen as a meaningful potential in the process of learning evaluation (Vanderhoven et al., 2015), is a collaborative activity that demands at least two peers' active engagements (Kollar & Fischer, 2010). MALA can facilitate the process of peer assessment through a technology-based device by providing fewer difficulties concerning technology literacy.

Recently, almost all people take along their mobile phones where ever they go and perceive them as compulsory things in their lives (Anglano, 2014; Free et al., 2013; Hardyman, Bullock, Brown, Carter-Ingram, & Stacey, 2013). In the last decade, the proliferation of mobile applications leads to the growth of social media which has become very popular among world citizens. WhatsApp is one of the most favored social media applications which is free of charge and the only cost the users should pay for is the cellular data usage for the internet access determined by every mobile operator (Johnston et al., 2015). Nevertheless, if they are connected with a wireless network, then no additional cost will be charged to them.

In Indonesia, WhatsApp is very popular among students. This free application is best-liked by the market because of its flexibility and practical features to call, text, and to send documents, audio, video, pictures, links, and location (Susanti & Tarmuji, 2016). Users can communicate personally or with two or more contacts at the same time within chat groups (Anglano, 2014). It is regarded as a user-friendly tool to communicate within a group and keep a communication track record for further use as a pedagogical matter (Giordano et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2015). In this digital age, students' life is excessively immersed with social media. Consequently, it is critical to engage them in a new mediated learning via social media, including WhatsApp (Shehu & Besimi, 2017).

The practice of peer assessment has been transformed by technological advances since the early presence of technology integration for peer assessment in the 1990s (Li, Gao, & Guo, 2019). The affordance of social media applications has offered innovations in engaging students during peer assessment activities; thus, it is essential to appreciate how different creations of technology may promote students' participation, foster their learning as well as suggest different promises. This study points at formative peer assessment which intends to engage learners in both roles as assessors and assesses during the process. As assessors, they evaluate their peers' work quality and give constructive feedback. As assesses, they appraise the assessment and feedback they receive and revise their work accordingly (Li, Liu, & Zhou, 2011). In this regard, involving learners in the assessment process creates more desirable learning activities which lead to more student-centered and collaborative learning.

The researchers of the present study are interested in investigating what the emerging shift in WhatsApp may offer in the field of online oral peer assessment. Yet, the review of literature discloses that reported study related to the use of social media platforms for peer assessment is scarce (Li et al., 2019). Among the few studies concerning WhatsApp to support the peer assessment process, Guler (2016) examined the implementation of WhatsApp in assisting both anonymous and non-anonymous online peer assessment. He inferred that WhatsApp can be applied as an effective device to support peer assessment since both groups had positive attitudes towards the process of peer assessment. Likewise, Samaie et al. (2016) focused on the investigation of WhatsApp as an apparatus for self and peer assessment. Working with 30 Iranian English students, the findings emphasized the participants' negative attitudes towards the use of WhatsApp as an assessment tool, unlike the results in Güler's study, due to various reasons.

Speaking as one of the most pivotal skills in ELT needs an assessment which is set in a real-life context and occurred in a natural flow to achieve its maximum results (Brown, 2004) and peer-assessment can be an appropriate choice due to its features. Concerning the intricate process of oral assessments, an analytic scoring rubric is employed in this study. In this rubric, both assessors and assesses capable of evaluating and recognizing each element of oral proficiency that requires more concern and improvement, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and so forth. Making learners comprehensible in practicing scoring rubric during the training process of peer assessment is vital to reduce subjectivity issue (Brown, 2004).

Studies focusing on applying peer assessment for oral skills were conducted in several aspects, for instance, self and peer assessment of speaking performances in terms of segmental aspects of pronunciation and fluency (Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, 2016), and the effect of peer assessment on students' intonation and stress as suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation (Penuela, 2015). Many studies have also investigated the integration of WhatsApp as an educational tool (Alqahtani, Bhaskar, Elumalai, & Abumelha, 2018; Gallardo, Marqués, & Bullen, 2015; Gasaymeh, 2017; Giordano et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2015; Mwakapina, 2016; So, 2016). However, there are only a few studies concerning the use of WhatsApp for language assessment (Guler, 2016; Samaie et al., 2016).

In the Indonesian context, a few researchers focused on the integration of mobile-assisted language assessment in speaking skills. There have been limited studies concerned with EFL learners' perceptions of WhatsApp as a tool for speaking assessment. Hence, this research focused on an inquiry into EFL learners' perceptions of WhatsApp for oral peer assessment. This study is aimed to scrutinize the Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions towards the use of WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class, as well as its potential benefits and drawbacks, with three main research questions below:

1. What are the EFL learners' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class?
2. What are the benefits of using WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class?
3. What are the drawbacks of using WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class?

METHOD

This study employed a basic qualitative research design to collect and analyze the data. This type of qualitative study presents descriptive information to understand the viewpoint of aspects being examined (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). The qualitative approach was

selected since it allowed the researchers to explore the learners' experiences and perceptions of online peer assessments.

The participants involved in this study were 14 twelfth grade learners, consisted of 8 females and 6 males, of a secondary school in Indonesia. They were all EFL learners and ages ranged from 17 to 19 years. They were purposively selected as they had experienced and been familiar with the implementation of peer assessment in the speaking classroom during face-to-face learning. Generally speaking, they had adequate knowledge and training in the peer assessment process. Thus, the researchers intended to examine their experiences when they conducted online peer assessments along with their teacher via the WhatsApp application. For this reason, hopefully, they could express their views comprehensively as well as state the benefits and drawbacks they encountered when they experienced the online peer assessment.

A semi-structured interview was administered to find out the learners' perceptions as well as the benefits and drawbacks they faced when they applied the online peer assessment process via WhatsApp. Yet, the researchers did not force the participants to be interviewed, only those who were willing to be volunteers in the interview process (8 participants, all of them were female) were asked and recorded by the researchers. The interview lasted approximately 20 minutes for each participant. The data obtained from the interviews were then analyzed by using phenomenological analysis in which the researchers attempted to comprehend the participants' feelings and ideas based on what they uttered and then finalized to confirm the truth after taking suggestions of a qualitative studies expert. The participants were asked open-ended questions which were taken from the interview employed to collect data on students' attitudes by Sanavi & Tarighat (2014) and were adapted to fit this study as follows:

1. What do you think of WhatsApp as a tool for conducting peer assessment of oral proficiency?
2. What benefits do you obtain when using WhatsApp for peer assessment of oral proficiency?
3. What drawbacks do you find when using WhatsApp for peer assessment of oral proficiency?
4. Would you like to implement this method again?

The utilization of online peer assessment in a speaking class through WhatsApp was conducted in two sessions. Firstly, the teacher created a WhatsApp group, inserted all learners' contacts, and started the instruction. In the first session, since the learners had been familiar with peer assessment previously, the teacher did not need to spend a long time explaining the procedures. After the procedures were clarified and assessment rubrics were sent and understood by the learners, they were instructed to record a two-minute video of oral performance and share it with the group so that other peers could evaluate and give comments on it. By doing so, all learners had significant roles as both assessors and assesses. They were encouraged to assess each aspect of oral performance stated in the assessment rubrics as Excellent, Good, Fairly Good, or Need Improvement. Besides, they should provide meaningful comments and feedbacks for their peers' work improvement.

In the second session, after all learners gave assessments and received feedback from their peers, they were assigned to record and share the second video or oral performance based on the evaluation they had acquired. In this regard, they all had the same chance to improve their speaking skill by considering the peer feedback they received in the first session. Then, each of them should give assessments and feedback on their peers' second

video. After all learners' assessments and comments were posted, the teacher explained her final comments, stressed the errors not mentioned, and resolved any debates among the learners regarding the points in oral performances. In this case, the teacher used videos to record the learners' oral performances, voice recorders and texts to give the instructions, and documents to fill the assessment rubrics. At the end of the session, the eight learners were interviewed for their perceptions of the method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

These sections are shaped from the analysis of the data during the interview section and presented to address the three research questions.

RQ 1: What are the EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Use of WhatsApp for Peer Assessment in a Speaking Class?

The results showed that seven out of eight learners expressed positive responses towards this method. Also, when they were asked whether they wanted to carry out the same method again, seven out of eight learners undoubtedly said yes. Among the seven learners, three of them pointed out that this new way of peer assessment through a mobile application was very flexible and practical to be executed in this pandemic era. One of them said:

"I like this learning method, it is so practical and flexible because I do not have to prepare many things. All I need is just my WhatsApp application, internet connection, and I am ready to follow the peer assessment process anywhere and anytime."

In line with the findings of research conducted by So (2016) in Hong Kong that students had positive perceptions towards the use of WhatsApp as it served flexible learning in higher education. Learners could follow the learning process wherever they are only with a single mobile application on their hands. As supported by Gon & Rawekar (2017) that WhatsApp has been a convenient new platform for online teaching and learning in which teachers can exist anywhere, at any time.

Another three learners believed that WhatsApp can be utilized as a medium for online English teaching and learning since it was helpful for their learning by facilitating interactive communication with both the teacher and other learners as well as promoting collaborative learning by sharing ideas and providing feedback for each other. This was reflected from one of the learners' utterances below:

"By using this virtual method I can still communicate effectively with my teacher and peers. I also enjoy following the instruction, changing ideas, and giving comments for my peers' oral performance. I think we can use WhatsApp as a medium for other subjects too."

It was confirmed by the study from Malecela (2016) and So (2016) that WhatsApp could be a useful learning apparatus for English teaching and learning on account of its collaborative learning support and sharing of educational ideas. A similar perception was also reported in Ngaleka & Uys's (2013) study which claimed that WhatsApp could be implemented to facilitate mobile learning. It was essential in supporting communication outside the class to exchange information among students.

A learner argued that mobile-assisted language assessment via WhatsApp was an appropriate alternative to complement traditional assessments for its potential in reducing the threat of face-to-face interactions. See her following statement:

“Through online peer assessment, I do not feel stressed when assessing my peers' performances because I do not see them directly and the only task I need to do is assessing their videos. While in the classroom, looking at their eyes when assessing their performance makes me nervous and spoils the process.”

In accordance with Tarighat & Khodabakhsh's (2016) research findings that students also perceived WhatsApp as a beneficial tool in language assessment. More specifically, the method was not used as a single form of assessment to replace the traditional assessments, rather complement its existence.

The last learner who gave a negative response towards this method preferred to be assessed in her class performance. She posted that:

“Speaking proficiency should be assessed directly through face-to-face interactions to get accurate results. Many factors affect one's speaking proficiency in online classrooms, such as the possibility to cheat or read a text.”

Another concern was the possibility for learners to cheat and read a text during the assessments. Likewise, students also preferred to be assessed in class performance because their peers read a text during the voice recording (Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, 2016). In reality, the feature used in this current study was a video recording in which any suspicious movements (i.e. reading a text) could be easily recognized than in a voice recording. This is in line with the results of the study by Samaie et al. (2016) that the participants also revealed a negative response towards this method since the assessment of oral performance was supposed to be done through face-to-face classrooms, not in virtual ones.

RQ 2: What are the Benefits of Using WhatsApp for Peer Assessment in a Speaking class?

Based on the learners' answers, the benefits of using WhatsApp for peer assessment of oral proficiency were divided into two concerns; technical and academic benefits.

Technical Benefits

Five learners claimed its ease of access and use was one of the technical benefits as one of them said:

“It is very easy to access since I have already installed it on my phone 2 years ago. You can install it freely as long as you are connected to the internet. Besides, it is also simple to use, I can send texts, videos, photos, and many things only by using a single button.”

Since all learners had already owned this application and used it for daily communication, it was not surprising that they were well-versed in using it during the assessment process without any prior training. Its ease of use was also confirmed by the participants in Gasaymeh's (2017) research who had positive feelings about the integration of WhatsApp in education as an easy and fun tool for formal learning.

Four other learners proposed that this application facilitated fast response and communication among the users. Compared to other social media applications, WhatsApp contained features that provided its users to send and respond to messages immediately and instantly. One of the learners confirmed that:

“WhatsApp has no limitation in terms of messages and whenever I share something in a group, my friends can receive it quickly. I can recognize who has read my post and others can reply to it as soon as possible. It is preferable compared to other social media applications, such as Facebook, which has limited features.”

WhatsApp provides features for the users to check whether their messages have been delivered and read by the receivers or not. Accordingly, they can get fast response and communicate easily with others. WhatsApp could be preferable for its fast communication and therefore, over towered other social networks (Cetinkaya, 2017).

Another two learners noted that WhatsApp benefited because it was more affordable than other online learning platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, etc. This could be seen from this excerpt:

“When I use Zoom or Google Meet for my online learning platform in another subject, I must have a stable WIFI connection or buy larger internet data, otherwise, my connection will be disturbed and I cannot follow the lesson smoothly. Yet, in WhatsApp, I do not have to worry about them anymore as it is affordable and cheaper than any other applications.”

This result is in accordance with Cetinkaya's (2017) study which revealed that compared to other online platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meet, WhatsApp is more affordable in terms of its smaller internet data needed.

Academic Benefits

Encouraging all learners to be active in a speaking class was proposed by two learners as one of the academic benefits of this method. Through WhatsApp, a speaking activity that was most of the time regarded as a passive class turned out to be an active one due to its equal opportunity for all learners to speak. As mentioned by a learner:

“Usually, most of us keep silent during the speaking activity, however, at this moment we all have the same chance to practice speaking and being assessed by our peers. I like this situation where no one is more dominant in the class.”

Tarighat & Khodabakhsh (2016) confirmed that equal opportunity for all students to speak was the main advantage. No one is more dominant than others in the speaking activity seemed to be the important thing emphasized by learners.

Four learners claimed that using WhatsApp for oral peer assessment created an enjoyable speaking class in terms of reducing stress and anxiety in their speaking performances. It was reflected in the following excerpt:

“I enjoy this method because I can speak without the stress that I will make mistakes in speaking skills. I can check what I say and make the best video over and over again before I finally share it with the group. While in the conventional class, I just have one chance to speak and cannot revise what I have said previously.”

Conducting peer assessment in an online speaking class through WhatsApp potentially created an enjoyable speaking activity by reducing the stress and anxiety in doing speaking performances. Students could speak without stress and have more chances to check in advance what they say (Samaie et al., 2016; Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, 2016). Having more time to think and create better sentences led to reducing their worry.

Getting valuable feedback from both the teacher and peers for language improvements was the next academic benefit noticed by six learners. Most of them felt that the feedbacks were really helpful and gave significant contributions to their oral performances. Furthermore, through WhatsApp, they were not shy and afraid of assessing and giving comments for peers' works. One of them explained:

"Feedbacks given by my teacher and peers were so meaningful for my speaking skill improvements. In the first session, I still have lots of weaknesses and they provided suggestions for me. Then, in the second session, I am happy since my oral performance was much better and it was confirmed by my teacher as well. I am not shy and afraid of giving assessments anymore, not like in the face-to-face class."

This finding is different from Tarighat & Khodabakhsh's (2016) study that some students found the feedbacks brutal and discouraging at times. Different contexts and prior training to peer assessment may impact these results. While in this present study, the positive effect of feedbacks was reflected from the learners' statements of their speaking improvements in the second session. Peer feedback was indirectly useful for the favorable outcome of oral proficiency (Faridah, Thoyyibah, & Kurnia, 2020).

Four other learners confessed that this method benefited from providing a flexible learning environment. As this excerpt showed that:

"Just to be honest, the advantage I get from this method is that I can still join the learning process even if I am still on my bed and not well-dressed. As long as I can access the WhatsApp application, I can follow the teacher's instructions and assess my peers' performances."

Learners could learn anytime, anywhere and it was free of time and place limitations. WhatsApp also presented the foremost advantage of a flexible learning environment by skipping place and time limitations (Sundgren, 2017).

RQ 3: What are the Drawbacks of Using WhatsApp for Peer Assessment in a Speaking Class?

Seven out of eight learners noticed the drawbacks of using WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class which was divided into two concerns; technical and academic drawbacks.

Technical Drawbacks

Full memory capacity seemed to be the major technical drawback declared by five learners. As one of them stated below:

"Sometimes I have to regularly erase unnecessary photos or files so that I can download the upcoming videos and documents because my mobile memory capacity is full. The one that takes a large amount of capacity is video, as a result, I cannot keep all peers' video recordings on my mobile phone."

Learners complained about this drawback concerning the requirements of sending and receiving a large amount of data in the forms of video, text, document, and voice recording. Similar to the findings in Cetinkaya's (2017) study, students found that the files they received in their WhatsApp applications took much memory capacity so they had to delete redundant or unnecessary files to enable them to receive new learning files.

Two learners argued that the problem with internet data quota was their main technical drawback, especially when there is no WIFI connection available around them. This was exactly as what a learner stated below:

“When I have no connection to WIFI, I get trouble in playing the videos because I cannot download them successfully if my internet data quota was limited.”

Still related to the video recordings, downloading them also spent a larger internet data quota. It turned out to be a problem when learners had very limited internet quota or did not connect to WIFI. Several students were reluctant to pay for it and solely relied on the available WIFI connection, and that hampered the teaching instructions (Cetinkaya, 2017).

Academic Drawbacks

Three learners claimed that using WhatsApp as a learning medium sometimes distracted their concentration during the process. It is confirmed by the learners' excerpts below:

“Sometimes, when I have an online class via WhatsApp and I concentrate on the task or video, messages or even a call come to my phone and it is so brothering. It distracts my concentration and I forget the last material I learn.”

“Some messages that I receive during my study always disturb me because when I accidentally open them, I lose the last chat I read on WhatsApp so that I must scroll them up. So, to overcome it, I always mute all notifications when I study.”

Since the application is also used for other businesses, not only for learning, so other messages or calls potentially distracted their focus. As reported by So (2016) that the participants of his study revealed that their private life matters might interfere with the use of WhatsApp for learning. Other limitations of using WhatsApp were such as lack of privacy, short battery life, and distraction (Church & Oliveira, 2013; Rambe & Bere, 2013; Willemse, 2015).

The second academic drawback mentioned by two students was limited time available for clarification. There would be no opportunity for both assessors to negotiate ideas and assesses to ask for clarifications through follow-up questions. They should be able to infer by their perceptions and another disagreement among them would be later clarified by the teacher. One of them said:

“We cannot meet and speak face to face, therefore I cannot ask for more information if there is something I still in doubt.”

Similar findings were found in the study done by Samaie et al. (2016) that the inefficiency of WhatsApp information because no opportunity for asking and clarifying things because it took more time to spend. This result was also relevant to the study by Hariadi & Simanjuntak (2020) that the physical interaction absence emerged difficulties for learners to effectively interact with each other.

The last academic drawback was its time-consuming process which was confirmed by four students. As explained by one of the learners:

"I like learning through WhatsApp, however, it is rather time-consuming because we have to type what we want to say or ask in the group. It is quite different from face-to-face interactions, so we all should be patient in doing the process."

Comparing to the face-to-face learning process, the peer assessment process via WhatsApp took a longer time. In the conventional class, the teacher and learners could directly talk and ask each other. Meanwhile, in WhatsApp, they should read the texts, listen to the voice recordings, and pay attention to the videos to understand each other which required more time to take place. In the research conducted by Tarighat & Khodabakhsh (2016), some students also believed that the process was rather time-consuming and, even, did not want to take part again.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to scrutinize the Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions towards the use of WhatsApp for peer assessment in a speaking class as well as the benefits and drawbacks they encountered during the process. The findings revealed that almost all learners had positive perceptions of this method. They proposed that WhatsApp was very potential to be utilized as an appropriate medium for online speaking assessments. Only one learner preferred face-to-face interactions to virtual classes. Regarding its benefits, all learners agreed that technically WhatsApp was not only easy to access and use, provide fast response and communication, but also affordable than other online learning platforms. Meanwhile, academically, WhatsApp was believed as encouraging all learners to be active, creating an enjoyable speaking class, providing valuable feedback and a flexible learning environment.

In terms of its drawbacks, seven out of eight learners noted several obstacles they had during the process. On the contrary, one learner declared that she did not have any problem with it. Technically, WhatsApp easily took a large amount of memory capacity and internet data quota during the instructions. Additionally, distraction in learning concentration, limited time available for clarification, and its time-consuming process were noticed as academic drawbacks the learners faced during the peer assessment process via WhatsApp. Nevertheless, WhatsApp as a tool for mobile-assisted language assessment is not supposed to be perceived as a single major assessment for speaking skills, rather as an alternative to complement traditional assessments. Future studies can be done by implementing different platforms for other language skills with a larger variety of participants from other regions and backgrounds and focus on its effectiveness in a specific skill by conducting tests in more than two sessions of the peer assessment process to get more valid and reliable data.

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