ELT STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS WHATSAPP FOR LEARNING ENGLISH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The research was conducted to find out the perceptions of ELT students towards the use of *WhatsApp* as a Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) device for learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher distributed a survey which was filled out by 225 English Language Teaching (ELT) students of Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. The data analysis results show that the students find *WhatsApp* convenient features due to its connectivity, instant, portability, spontaneity, personalized, and ubiquity. They think that the app is useful for bite-size learning, blended learning, collaborative learning, various learning strategies, learning autonomy, task-based learning, asynchronous and synchronous learning, facilitating interactivity, and for mediating learning. They are also content to use *WhatsApp* for self-study and improving learning motivation.

Keywords: *ELT, learner perceptions, MALL, WhatsApp*

The new condition of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia made lecturers and students adapt to a new instructional model. Using application through mobile devices, students are now able to learn many subjects especially English at home. According to the *Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu Pendidikan Jawa Timur,* an institution for ensuring education's quality in East Java (2020), WhatsApp is the most used application by the Indonesians as a medium for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by *Rumah Belajar* and *Google Education* as the second and third position respectively. Most lecturers and students used WhatsApp to learn English because as many as 83% of people who use social media in Indonesia use WhatsApp in their daily life to communicate online (Wardani, 2020, as cited in Indriani & Prasanti, 2020). Thus, the highest percentage of WhatsApp's utilizing became a great consideration to teach English more simply and fast (Yeboah & Evur, 2014, as cited in Marcella, 2020). Lecturers also use WhatsApp because it provides privacy along with low-cost application compared to other social networks (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014, as cited in Gon & Rawekar, 2017).

Even though *WhatsApp* becomes the most used application by lecturers in Indonesia, actually *WhatsApp* is not good for conducting synchronous learning activities and engaging students in language learning. This is because the app provides a limited voice or video call with a maximum of 50 people who can join in (DetikInet, 2020), has relatively poor quality of picture resolution (Jakhar et al., 2020), and cannot share screen for presentation. Thus, learning English that needs to have face-to-face activity should be conducted through other online media. *WhatsApp* is also not a good medium for attracting students' learning engagement because learning through *WhatsApp* makes students lack of effective participation (Wahid et al., 2018). While learning in a chat group session, for example, students might lack focus due to distractions coming from other chats in WhatsApp and therefore, cannot be fully committed to participate in the main chat of classroom discussions. Whereas, according to Bond (2019), active participation is one of behavioral engagements' aspects that should be fulfilled in learning process. However, due to the emergency and limitations in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesian lecturers choose *WhatsApp* to teach English even though it is not an ideal MALL application. Having reviewed the background of the study above, the researcher is interested in conducting this study to find out ELT students' perceptions towards *WhatsApp* as a MALL application for learning English during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WhatsApp's Merits and Shortcomings

Some of *WhatsApp's* merits are that it provides privacy along with low-cost application compared to other social networks (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014, as cited in Gon & Rawekar, 2017), It allows the user to exchange videos, messages, pictures, and voice notes, it also supports the interaction of up to 50 group members, the number of messages that people would like to share on *WhatsApp* is unlimited, it also saves the messages automatically when the device is off, there is no charges involved

for using *WhatsApp* because it utilizes the same data plan for Email or Web browsing, and *WhatsApp*'s user do not need to remember password or username as it works via phone number.

However, *WhatsApp* also has some shortcomings, which among others, are it provides a limited voice or video call with a maximum of 50 people who can join in (DetikInet, 2020) and has relatively poor quality of picture resolution (Jakhar et al., 2020), students can be distracted in learning while chatting, students' lack of commitment for effective participation, *WhatsApp* readability in small screen of mobile devices which can be a challenge for effective integration of learning tools (Wahid et al., 2018), and using *WhatsApp* as a MALL device in learning English is a communication overload as the teacher and students can send many messages and photos in the chat group session and as a result, they potentially miss important information (Baishya, 2018).

METHOD

In this study, the researcher used a survey as a form of quantitative research using a rating scale. Survey design is a procedure in quantitative research in which a researcher investigates a sample or population to identify the attitude, opinions, behavior, characteristics of the population (Creswell, 2012).

The study was conducted online so it did not require the researcher and the subjects to gather in a place. The time of the study was on March 3rd to 5th, 2021.

The population in this study are ELT UM students from Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang in the 2020/2021 academic year with total 502 students. Convenience sampling was employed in the study as the participants were selected based on their willingness to respond to the online questionnaire. There were 225 students who responded to the survey and thus considered as the research samples. Although it cannot be said with confidence that the samples are representative of the population, they can provide useful information for answering the research questions and hypotheses (Creswell, 2012). The 225 respondents were from ELT study program of the 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 cohorts. More specifically, there were 61 students in the 8th semester taken from cohort of 2017, 54 students in the 6th semester from cohort 2018, 49 students in the 4th semester from cohort 2019, and 57 students in the 2nd semester from cohort 2020.

The instrument of the study was a questionnaire. It was developed based on the following steps. Firstly, the researcher made a blueprint based on relevant MALL theories, especially the characteristics of MALL by Cakir (2016). The variables are (1) the convenience or the ease of use which includes connectivity, instant, portability, spontaneity, personalized, and ubiquity, (2) the usefulness of *WhatsApp* which includes bite-size learning, blended learning, collaborative learning, different learning strategies, learning autonomy, task-based, asynchrony, synchrony, interactivity, and mediator, and (3) the behavioral intention towards *WhatsApp* which includes motivating and self-study. Secondly, the researcher made a grid of rating scale from the blueprint. Rating scale is a response scale that the response options are chosen with a true zero and equal between items (Creswell, 2012). Finally, the researcher transformed the statements and grid of rating scale into an online questionnaire. The four sections of the questionnaire are demographic questions, statements of students' perceptions towards the convenience or the ease of use of *WhatsApp*, statements of students' perceptions towards the usefulness of *WhatsApp* and statements of the behavioral intention towards *WhatsApp*. The questionnaire is in English because it was developed for ELT students. The questionnaire was completed by clicking one answer of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree.

The instrument was validated by two experts. One validator gave feedback on the clarity of the wording and the other validator gave feedback related to the additional content of the questionnaire, such as salutation, purpose, promise for the confidentiality, the way to fill out the rating scale, the meaning of the numbers, "Thank you" statements in the rating scale, and the demographic questions.

The data were collected using Google Forms, a cloud-based data management tool used for designing and developing web-based questionnaires (Narayanaswamy & Harinarayana, 2016). A link to the form was shared to the target population through *WhatsApp* from March 3 to 5, 2021. The respondents returned the completed questionnaire in a week. The collected data were then analyzed using *MS Excel*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher presented the result of the rating scale of ELT students' perceptions towards the ease of use of *WhatsApp*, the usefulness of *WhatsApp*, and the behavioral intention towards *WhatsApp* as follows.

The perceptions of ELT UM students towards the convenience or the ease of use of WhatsApp

In Figure 1, for the category of convenience or the ease of use of *WhatsApp*, as many as 81% of the students perceived that *WhatsApp* is convenient in order to connect them and to communicate with the lecturers and their classmates. This is in line with Cakir's (2016) research stating that two of characteristics of MALL are connectivity and spontaneity. This finding also supports the theory of MALL

especially *WhatsApp* stating that *WhatsApp* enables people to send messages simpler and faster (Yeboah & Evur, 2014, as cited in Marcella, 2020).

Regarding the second variable, as many as 67% of the students perceived that *WhatsApp* enables them instantly to learn English virtually. It means that *WhatsApp* provides quick answers to specific questions, (Cakir, 2019). This finding supports the theory of MALL especially WhatsApp arguing that *WhatsApp* is an instant messaging application that is used to send videos, messages, images, sound files, and others (Marcella, 2020).

On the third variable, as many as 82% of the students perceived that *WhatsApp* is a convenient application due to the portability. Students can move *WhatsApp* wherever they want because *WhatsApp* is an application which is in portable devices. Furthermore, students can get information easily from learning through *WhatsApp*. This is in line with Cakir's (2019) research stating that one of characteristics of MALL device is portability.

For the fourth variable, as many as 86% of the students agreed that *WhatsApp* is ubiquitous. In line with the theory of MALL by Cakir (2019) stating that one of the characteristics of a good MALL device is due to the ubiquity, this finding showed that students can learn English through *WhatsApp* wherever and whenever. Not only that, the finding in this study also showed that students can academically engage with lecturers and peers at any time and any place. Academically engage means students are required to understand effective connections within the academic environment and active students' behavior such as attendance, participation, effort, and prosocial behavior (Appleton et al., 2008; Christenson et al., 2012). Therefore, this finding supports the research of Bond (2019), stating that active participation is one of behavioral engagements' aspects that should be fulfilled in learning process. However, this finding does not support the theory in a study conducted by Wahid et al. (2018) arguing that one of *WhatsApp*'s disadvantages is *WhatsApp* makes students lack commitment for effective participation.
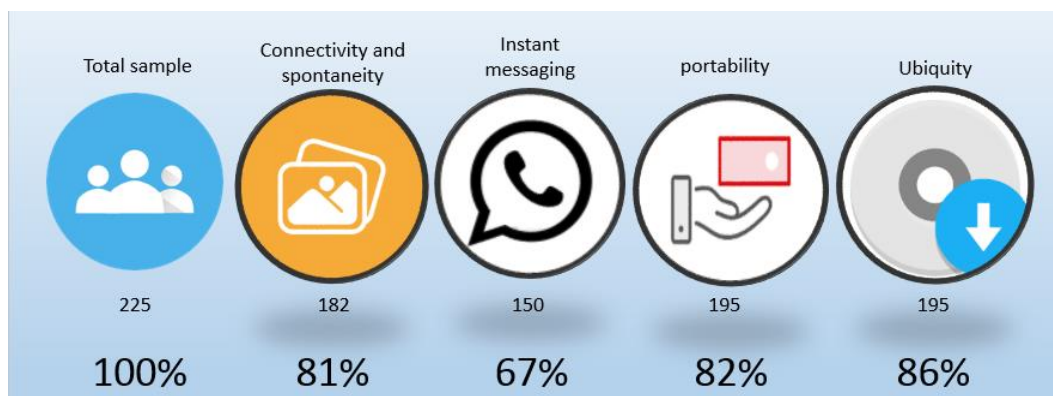

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of the convenience and the ease of use of *WhatsApp* for learning English (n=225)

The perceptions of ELT UM students towards the usefulness of WhatsApp

In Figure 2, it is shown that *WhatsApp* is useful for improving reading skill as 78% of the respondondents responded positively to the question related to this issue. This is in line with Cakir's statement (2019) that MALL consistently benefits young EFL learner's reading development, improves EFL learning attitude, and enhance students' cooperative learning skills, this percentage shows that students chose *WhatsApp* as a useful application for improving their reading skill. Not only improving their reading skill, this finding also showed that 50% students agreed that *WhatsApp* is also a useful application to improve students' writing skill. This study supports the finding of a study conducted by Marcella (2020) that *WhatsApp* increases students' confidence in writing.

WhatsApp is a useful application which is potential to improve students' reading and writing skills. Improving reading and writing skills is important for students' English competence. Through reading texts via *WhatsApp*, for example, students acquire new information and knowledge which are useful for the improvement of their writing. Their improved writing skills will then be imperative when they express ideas in English (Sadiku, 2015). Moreover, the findings support another TEFL theory stating that reading and writing form a strong relationship and complement with each other (Sadiku, 2015).

However, only 37% and 26% students respectively perceived that *WhatsApp* can improve their listening and speaking skills. It means that students do not perceive that *WhatsApp* improves their listening and speaking skills. These findings do not support the findings of a study conducted by Ajid et al. (2018) which suggest that *WhatsApp* improves students' listening and speaking skills. The difference might happen because the study conducted by Ajid et al. used an experimental design. They required the students to listen to audio recording and video conversation, and frequently asked students to use voice recording for practicing speaking. That is different from this study which used rating scale for exploring

students' perceptions towards *WhatsApp* in learning English. The English listening and speaking activities which ELT UM students did might be different from English listening and speaking activities which was done by the students in the experimental study of Ajid et al. (2018).

Figure 2. Students' perceptions of the language skills improved by learning using *WhatsApp* (n=225)

Figure 3 shows that most students chose *WhatsApp* as a useful application to learn English because *WhatsApp* improves students' vocabulary and enables students to practice good grammar. The improvement of vocabulary and grammar through *WhatsApp* is in line with the theory of TEFL in Indonesia which said that vocabulary and grammar, by the curriculum in Indonesia, are suggested to be taught in learning process in which vocabulary is the first stage to be dealt with (Susanto, 2017). The percentage of students who chose *WhatsApp* as a useful application to improve vocabulary is almost the same as the percentage of students who chose *WhatsApp* as a useful application to practice good grammar, namely 46% and 48% respectively. It means that students increase both their vocabulary and grammar's usage. This finding supports the result of a study conducted by Aksoy (2021) that said Vocabulary and grammar has a significant relationship. However, this finding does not support the result of a study conducted by Dehghan et al. (2017) which said that *WhatsApp* media does not effectively improve students' vocabulary. The difference might happen because of the different number of students and the method of study. This study had larger respondents as many as 225 respondents using rating scale quantitative method, while Dehghan et al. (2017) used experimental study with 32 students as the object of the study.
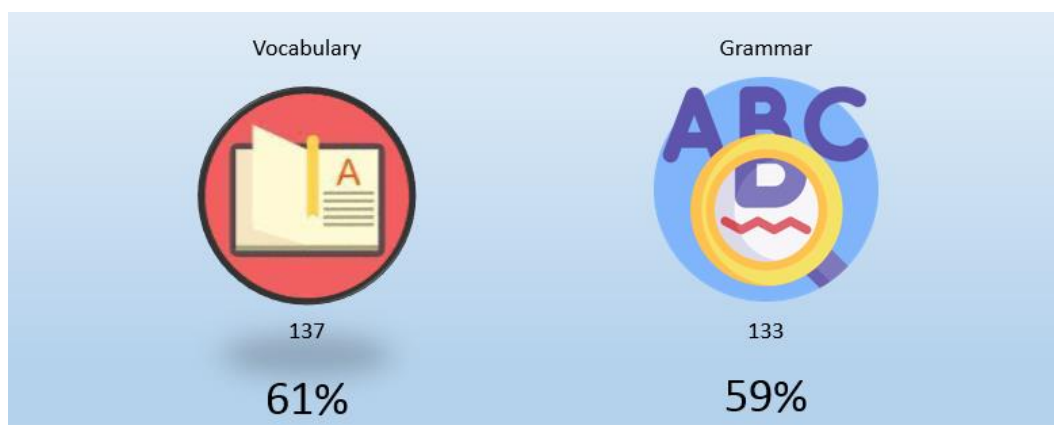

Figure 3. Students' perceptions of the language components improved by learning using *WhatsApp* (n=225)

In Figure 4, it is shown that as many as 70% of the students agreed that *WhatsApp* enables them to learn asynchronously well. This is in line with Cakir's (2019) research stating that one of MALL characteristics is asynchrony. Asynchrony means students interactively learning without being limited by time, place, or the constraints, (Mayadas, 1997, as cited in Shahabadi & Uplane, 2014). However, the finding of this study showed that only 39% of the students agreed that *WhatsApp* is good for learning synchronously. It can be inferred that they did not have good synchronous learning experience through *WhatsApp*. This finding does not support the theory of MALL (Cakir, 2019) that says one of characteristics of MALL is synchrony. This is because *WhatsApp* provides limited activities for synchrony which are only chat room and a voice or video call involving 50 people only (DetikInet, 2020), *WhatsApp* also has poor quality of picture (Jakhar et al., 2020), and *WhatsApp* cannot share screen for presentation so that the

synchronous activity which requires students and lecturers to have face-to-face activity cannot be conducted well.
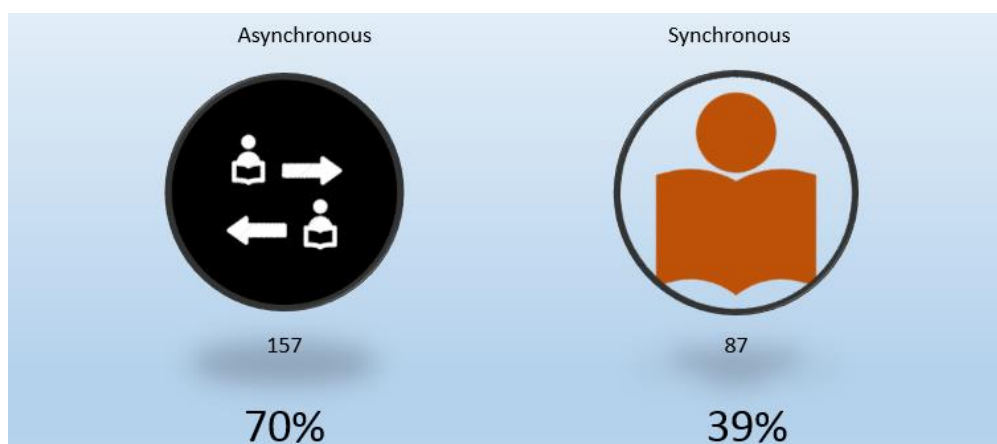

Figure 4. Students' perceptions of the ways of learning English conveniently using *WhatsApp* (n=225)

The perceptions of ELT UM students towards the behavioral Intention towards WhatsApp

In Figure 5, it is shown the students' perceptions towards the behavioral intention towards WhatsApp for learning English. The indicators of the category of the behavioral intention towards *WhatsApp* are motivating and self-study. In line with Marcellas's (2020) research stating that *WhatsApp* enhances students' leaning interest, this study also showed that WhatsApp made ELT UM students motivated to learn English. This finding also supports the theory of MALL (Cakir, 2016) asserting that one of characteristics of MALL is motivating. Motivating means WhatsApp improves learners' motivation in managing activities and completing tasks.

This study also showed that 83% of respondents prefer using *WhatsApp* to learn English than other online media. *WhatsApp* can be an English learning application which is useful and convenient as reflected on the student's responses to the first and second categories above. This study supports the finding of *Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu Pendidikan Jawa Timur*, an institution for ensuring education's quality in East Java (2020) stating that *WhatsApp* is the most used app by Indonesia as a medium for learning during the COVID-19. This result, however, does not support the finding of Mardiah (2020) that *WhatsApp* is the most used learning media because it is due to lecturers' unskillfulness in digital technology. In this study, *WhatsApp* is favorite because the students really prefer using it than using other media.

The finding of this research also showed that 75% of the students would not stop using *WhatsApp* as a MALL device to learn English in the future. In this COVID-19 pandemic, the use of *WhatsApp* as the most used application for teaching and learning process is indeed a good decision. Through the online learning during COVID-19, students found *WhatsApp* useful and convenient for learning English. Therefore, most of students chose to not stop using *WhatsApp* for learning English in the future. It can be seen also from the perception of ELT UM students towards the convenience or the ease of use (connectivity, instant, portability, spontaneity, personalized, and ubiquity), the usefulness of *WhatsApp* (bite-size learning, blended learning, collaborative learning, different learning strategies, learning autonomy, task based, asynchrony, synchrony, interactivity, and mediator), and the behavioral intention towards *WhatsApp* (motivating and self-study) are all positive.
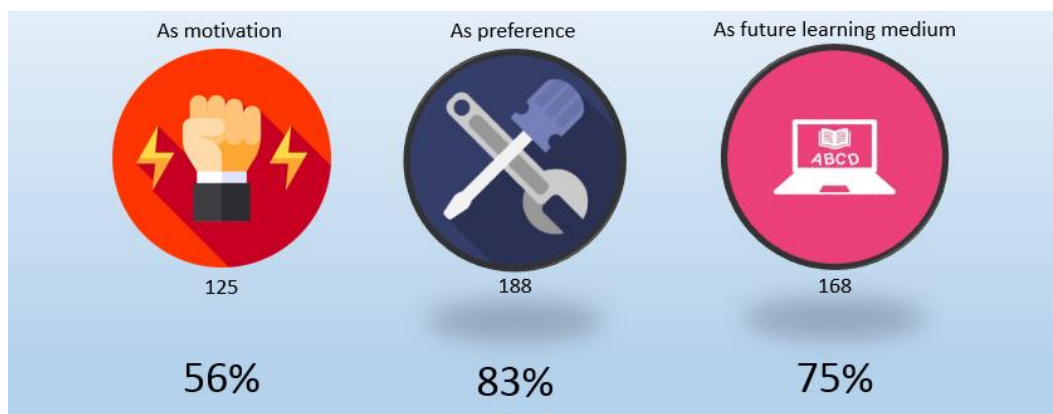

Figure 5. Students' Behavioral Intention towards the use of *WhatsApp* (n=225)

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, the perceptions of ELT UM students towards the use of *WhatsApp* for learning English during the COVID-19 Pandemic is convenient, useful, and desirable. Students perceived that *WhatsApp* is a convenient application which provides easier, faster, and clearer knowledge sharing. *WhatsApp* is also useful for improving students' reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar skills. Even though it was not entirely proven that *WhatsApp* did not improve students' speaking and listening skill effectively, and *WhatsApp* was not good for synchronous activities, most ELT students of Universitas Negeri Malang were motivated enough to learn English through *WhatsApp*. They also decided to continue using *WhatsApp* for learning English in the future.

In relation to the results of this study, it is suggested that the ELT lecturers keep using *WhatsApp* to teach English as students have positive perceptions towards *WhatsApp*. Their positive perceptions are closely related to the convenience or the ease of use (connectivity, instant, portability, spontaneity, personalized, and ubiquity), the usefulness of WhatsApp (bite-size learning, blended learning, collaborative learning, different learning strategies, learning autonomy, task based, asynchrony, synchrony, interactivity, and mediator), and the behavioral Intention towards *WhatsApp* (motivating and self-study).

It is also suggested that the lecturers need to make sure that they are aware of the good characteristics of *WhatsApp* as a MALL device before they teach English by using *WhatsApp*. In doing so, they could maximize the teaching and learning process through *WhatsApp* to get the best results of learning English. In case there is one or more characteristics of *WhatsApp* as a good MALL device that cannot be manifested, the lecturers should find a creative way to solve the problem first before using *WhatsApp* to teach English to their students.

In order to broaden the study results, it is also suggested for future researchers to conduct further studies that include students from other departments or universities so that they can compare the results to get more variety of interpretations and discussions on the students' perceptions towards the use of *WhatsApp* for learning English. They could also compare the use of *WhatsApp* for learning English with other similar applications, such as *Telegram, WeChat, Viber*, and so forth.

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