EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHATSAPP AND ITS POTENTIAL BENEFITS IN ELT PRACTICUM *

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تصورات متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية

حول تطبيق الواتساب وفوائده المحتملة

في التربية العملية لتخصص اللغة الانجليزية

Abstract

Technology has become an indispensable part of our daily life including the educational system. The current spread of the Internet and its enormous applications have provided various benefits, specifically, the use of web-based technologies in education. Since the introduction of m-learning into education, mobile phones, smartphones and tablets have become a great part of foreign language learning and teaching. Therefore, the widespread availability of smartphone technology seems to have a promising impact on education. In particular, WhatsApp, as a smartphone application, is considered one of the most popular communication platforms in the 21st century. Hence, the current study aimed at investigating the perceptions of WhatsApp among EFL Students, and its potential benefits in ELT practicum at al-Quds Open University in Palestine. The participants were 30 senior students who were enrolled in the English major (28 females and 2 males). These students were enrolled in EFL practicum during the academic year 2017-2018. To achieve the objectives of the study, a mixed research method was employed using multiple tools for data collection, including a questionnaire, a focus group and phone interviews via WhatsApp. Results revealed that the total degree of the students' perceptions of WhatsApp was high. The participating students used WhatsApp application to send and receive different types of materials and activities for communicating with the supervisor, the total number of which was 752. In light of these results, a number of recommendations were provided including, encouraging faculty members to integrate social media into the teaching environments by providing them with training programs, workshops, and online training. Moreover, the need for providing faculty members with curricula plans and activities that require implementation of WhatsApp in the learning environments.

Keywords: MALL, M-Learning, WhatsApp, Students Perceptions, ELT Practicum, QOU.

ملخص:

غدت التكنولوجيا جزءاً لا غنى عنه في حياتنا اليومية بما فيها النظم التعليمية، لا سيما في ظل الانتشار الكبير لشبكة الإنترنت وتطبيقاتها الهائلة في وقتنا الحاضر، وهناك فوائد وفيرة لاستخدام التكنولوجيا القائمة على شبكة الإنترنت في التعليم. ومع ولوج التعلم النقال لحقل التعليم، لحقت الهواتف النقالة والأجهزة اللوحية هذا الركب حين دخلت هي الأخرى مجالات تعليم اللغة الأجنبية، وبناء عليه، يبدو واضحا مدى تأثير وفرة تكنولوجيا الهواتف الذكية. ويعد تطبيق الواتساب بشكل خاص، كونه تطبيقا من تطبيقات الهواتف الذكية، واحداً من منصات الاتصالات الأكثر شعبية في القرن الحادي والعشرين. من هنا هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى التعرف على تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجاه تطبيق الواتساب وفوائده المحتملة في مقرر التربية العملية لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة القدس المفتوحة في فلسطين. وتكوَّن مجتمع الدراسة من ثلاثين طالبا وطالبة من طلبة السنة الرابعة في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية (28 من الإناث و 2 من الذكور) الذين سجلوا في مقرر التربية العملية في الفصل الأول من العام الدراسي 2017–2018. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، جرى استخدام أسلوب بحث مختلط شمل مصادر متعددة لجمع البيانات بما في ذلك الإستبيان، ومجموعة بؤَرية، ومقابلات هاتفية عبر تطبيق الواتساب. وأظهرت النتائج أن الدرجة الكلية لتصورات الطلبة حول تطبيق الواتساب كانت عالية، وقد استخدم الطلاب المشاركون تطبيق الواتساب لإرسال واستقبال أنواع مختلفة من المواد والأنشطة للتواصل مع المشرف بلغ العدد الإجمالي منها نشاطا 752 مادة ونشاطا. وفي ضوء هذه النتائج، قدمت جملة من التوصيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعلم اللغات بمساعدة التعلم النقال، التعلم النقال، الواتساب، تصورات الطلبة، التربية العلمية لتخصص اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة القدس المفتوحة.

Introduction and theoretical background

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedentedly great technological innovations as a result of the emergence of Information & Communication Technology (ICT), impacting all aspects of life. The Internet transformed our universe into a small global village that is easily interconnected. The use of technology became an inevitable part of almost every aspect of our daily life and the educational systems are no exception, as technology has a positive impact on the teaching/learning process. The great spread of the Internet and its enormous applications encouraged the use of web-based technologies in education and exploitation of their numerous benefits. This paved the way for mobile learning to be an innovative mean to deliver content and to embed technology in the university education. In this respect, the last two decades have witnessed a remarkable shift in Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) to become of a high interest among instructors and researchers. Obari & Lambacher (2015) argued that mobile technologies can be used in language learning with diverse advantages than the other methods, especially with the spread of English news programs, language-learning apps, podcasting and video-casting, that are easily accessible mostly for free.

Kukulska-Hulme (2012) identifies it as the use of mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages. Traxler (2013) similarly believes that mobile learning is learning through mobile technologies such as mobile phones, smartphones, e-readers and tablets. These devices offer unparalleled access to communication and information. Mobile learning (m-learning) thus, is considered a learner-centric approach which focuses on the mobility of the learner as well as the mobility of the learning process itself (Böhm & Constantine, 2016) In mobile language learning, the language learning process is assisted and enhanced by the use of a mobile device. Often, the acronym MALL is used to describe this approach of language learning. By the same token, Obari and Lambacher (2014), argue that m-learning can highly motivate learners since it provides them with a rich, informal and contextual learning environment that can exist anywhere. As a result, users can control the time, pace and speed of their own learning. M-learning is also more personalized than other methods of computerized instruction, as mobile devices can be more easily customized, resulting in the creation of an emotional bond between the user and the machine. Sweeney and Moore (2012) discuss four aspects which need to be considered for the design of mobile language learning apps: the mobile app design should allow for interactivity, the learning resources should include multimedia contents, utility and functionality of the learning resources should be fostered by contextual relevancy, and the app design should increase autonomous and personalized learning.

Mobiles, smartphones and tablets have been greatly introduced to foreign language learning as a result of introducing m-learning into education in the developed and developing countries alike. Especially when the features of computers are merged with mobile, increasing the access to technology at any time and in any place. Martin and Ertzberger (2013) studied the difference between using computers and mobile phones within a classroom setting and found that students showed more enthusiasm towards mobile devices. Such results indicate that mobile devices in general and smartphones in particular seem to be promising tools for deepening learning and making it further personalized and learner-centered.

Meishar-Tal and Ronen (2016) found that teachers' attitudes towards using smartphones in education were positive in all aspects .Such findings go in line with some previous studies which indicated that employing smartphones in education has the potential to decrease teachers' resistance to technology and increase their willingness to use these devices in teaching (Mac Callum & Jeffrey, 2014).

Billions of people these days, as a result of the affordability of smartphones all over the world, can access different forms of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, WeChat, Instagram Twitter, and Snapchat to keep in touch with their family and friends, and to exchange information. Claire

O'Malley et al., (2005) stated that the availability of the technical infrastructure for m-learning has paved the way for social networking and media applications such as WhatsApp and Blogs, that enable learners to interact with each other outside the classroom. Patient (2011) argued that contents of conversations among students using smartphone application revolved around exchanging academic information. Mistar and Amin Embi (2016) stated the benefit of integrating online discussion through smartphone applications in the learning process is the provision of the students with more opportunities to interact with their teachers and friends, which contributes to their learning and help in overcoming learning difficulties.

Smartphone is simply defined as a mobile phone with advanced computing capabilities and connectivity. Due to the accelerated development of smartphones, people started to move beyond mobile brands and features to look for mobile applications. Therefore, the widespread availability of smartphone technology seems to have a promising impact on education when it enables learners to communicate with their instructors and their classmates in real time, especially with the availability of wireless internet (Wifi) and the latest 3G technology. The third generation of mobile phone network technology is capable of fast rates of data transmission that supports e-mail communications, high-speed Internet access, video streaming, and so forth (Collins English Dictionary). All these innovative technological advancements make it much cheaper to communicate via social networking sites. Consequently, teachers everywhere including Palestine can benefit from the unique features of the latest release of smartphones to create a more interactive learning experience that helps students become engaged inside and outside the classroom. As a result, students' motivation will be increased especially when smartphones can be used 24/7, nearly for free. According to Sharples and Vavoula (2007), smartphones provide students with the ability to learn outside the classroom environment where the students become the center of learning.

In the Palestinian context, people, especially teenagers and university students, are increasingly conversing online using a variety of social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others.

Moreover, the number of smartphone users is rapidly increasing among high school and college students to the extent that there seems to be an emotional bond between the smartphone user and this device. One reason for this widespread use is the availability and affordability of mobile devices in the Palestinian market. Moreover, smartphones allow users to make personal profiles, create content and share messages by connecting with other users in the system anytime anywhere. The small screen size and touch interface of smartphones are also factors behind the widespread use of these devices. Thus, the current study aimed at investigating the perceptions of EFL Students towards WhatsApp and its potential benefits in ELT Practicum at al-Quds Open University in Palestine. More specifically, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of WhatsApp among EFL students in practicum?

2. What are the benefits obtained by students of ELT practicum when using WhatsApp?

What is up with WhatsApp?

Church and de Oliveira (2013) carried out a study titled "What's up with WhatsApp?" to investigate the difference in the perceptions and motives of the use of WhatsApp and traditional SMS, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons and mechanism behind adopting and appropriating WhatsApp in the smartphone users' daily lives. The study also aimed at exploring which factors influence the acceptance, usage and popularity of such application. The results revealed that the nature and intent of WhatsApp messages tend to be more social, informal and conversational, while SMS is seen as more privacy preserving, more formal and generally more reliable.

Mistar and Amin Embi (2016) reported that WhatsApp is the most popular communication platform in the 21st century depending on the fact that it uses real-time messages and fast knowledge resources. Ramakrishnan and Johnsi Priya (2016) found that WhatsApp ranks at the top unlike the other applications. The results came after revealing that 100% of arts and science college students chat

with friends. In their study, 96.33% of students chat with classmates and less than 1% chat with neighbors, parents and teachers. This popularity was also confirmed by Constine (2018) who stated that WhatsApp hit 1.5 billion monthly users in January 2018. Furthermore, Mistar and Amin Embi (2016) indicated that 97% of Malaysians were found to be using WhatsApp because it has a variety of features and functions that enable the user to exchange easily text messages, audio files, video , images and website links.

The good news is that this application is available to all brands of smart phones and the software is available for Apple iOS, Google Android, Blackberry OS, Microsoft windows phone and others. Once the user has an efficient smartphone with a connection to the internet, whether through Wi-Fi or the user's cell phone network, he /she can install the application from Google Play Store and start communicating with friends, relatives, classmates, and teachers as well.

Regarding the history of WhatsApp, the service was founded by Jan Koum and Brian Acton who had previously worked 20 years combined at Yahoo. Later, in 2014, WhatsApp joined Facebook but continues to operate as a separate app with laser focus on building a messaging service that works fast and reliably anywhere in the world (https://www.whatsapp.com/about/). According to its official site, WhatsApp Messenger is a cross platform mobile messaging app for smart phones such as iPhone, Android phones, Windows Mobile or Blackberry. WhatsApp allows users to send and receive messages, photos and other information, and it is considered an alternative to text messages or SMS. Furthermore, WhatsApp can be used for text and voice messaging, chatting, audio and video calling, sending-receiving documents and files, and creating groups.

With regard to the importance of WhatsApp groups, Zayed (2016) highlighted the possible communication pattern between the teacher and the students when creating a group that can be used to answer students' questions and inquiries about the course material and requirements, and to deliver announcements to them. The teacher can also check if the students have received and read the messages sent to them through the single

gray arrow and the two blue arrows respectively. The user in WhatsApp group can name the group, mute or customize notifications, use voice calls, share messages, photos and videos with up to 256 people at once.

Regarding cost saving, Riyanto (2013) argued that users take advantage of WhatsApp to text their friends in other countries without paying the exorbitant international texting costs that come with traditional communications. Roffe (2013) agrees with this point of view when he argued that a big reason for the popularity of such apps is that they allow their users to message one another without paying high fees for text messages. This means that WhatsApp users need not worry about expensive call charges when it's made through the phone's internet connection, instead of cell plan's voice minutes, to have face-to-face conversations and voice and video calls in addition to text messages. All these features imply that WhatsApp is easy, cheap, convenient, reliable, entertaining, which might explain why WhatsApp has currently around 1.5 billion users over the globe.

Literature review

Due to the widespread adoption of WhatsApp by approx. 1.5 billion users around the world, several researchers have examined the effects of using this innovation on students' learning and on their attitudes and perceptions as well. Several studies have pointed that WhatsApp can be easily accessed and used by all people for communicative purposes. For example, Devi and Tevera (2014) found that WhatsApp was one of the most popular social sites among university students, while Ahad and Lim (2014) found that WhatsApp is popular among undergraduate students, and that they use it on a daily basis. They attributed their extensive use of WhatsApp to its ease of use, speed, real-time messaging, and low cost. This finding is in line with Amshah and Thabian (2017) study, which found that the top preferred social media among 450 students at the Jordanian universities was Facebook 88 %, WhatsApp 78.7%, YouTube 51.6%, Instagram 32.4%, Viber 26.9% and Twitter 13.6%. The students used WhatsApp for sending text messages, pictures, music and videos (10.7 %) while 16.7 % used them to share ideas with friends

and experts and to exchange experience.

Other supporting evidence was given by Ida Sanjaya (2012) whose study revealed that users of WhatsApp tend to use it because it has attractive facilities and functions that enable the user to share information in the form of text files, audio files , videos, messages, images and others. These features and others explain why this networking tool is one of the most popular sites according to Aifan (2015). She found that the most frequently used tool by her sample of 510 students was WhatsApp, which has become a mobile learning style for faster and easier communication between students and teachers, in particular when teachers use it to attract their students interest through fun-based learning experiences.

Concerning perceptions and attitudes towards WhatsApp and its benefits, Gasaymeh (2017) aimed at investigating 154 university students' use of WhatsApp for personal and educational purposes in addition to examining their perceptions of the formal integration of WhatsApp into education. The results revealed that WhatsApp was common among participants for personal and social purposes on a daily basis while the use of WhatsApp for educational purposes was limited. Nevertheless, the participants perceived the integration of WhatsApp into education to be easy, fun, and useful and they had positive feelings and intentions about using WhatsApp in their formal learning .To some extent, Tang and Hew (2017) had a similar view when they reported that WhatsApp has been used in different academic disciplines to support students' learning.

Selva Kumar (2016) aimed at understanding the respondents' perceptions towards using WhatsApp as a learning tool for Mandarin language learning at Universiti Kuala Lumpur. The data was collected via a questionnaire on students' attitudes towards using WhatsApp and their perceptions. Results indicated that the utilization of WhatsApp improved students' learning performance inside and outside the classroom. The main advantage of using WhatsApp is that it can be used anywhere-anytime, and it can be adopted to enhance students' interaction and learning experiences in Mandarin Language lessons.

Ngaleka & Uys (2013) reported that

WhatsApp facilitates mobile learning when the students use it as a communication tool outside the classroom to exchange information about meetings and projects. In addition, the authors found that students had positive attitudes towards using WhatsApp in education. These results go in line with Yeboah and Ewur (2014) who found that most higher education students were extensive users of WhatsApp; more than 96% used it for more than three hours a day. Most participants used it for chatting, while only 7% reported using it for academic work.

Students' perceptions to the use of WhatsApp in their educational processes have been examined in other studies. For instance, Malecela (2016) examined students' perceptions of WhatsApp as a learning tool in Malaysia. A qualitative research design was used in which interviews were conducted with a number of students. The results showed that the students believed WhatsApp is helpful in their learning by facilitating communication with other students and with the instructor, by enhancing collaborative learning, and by sharing educational information.

So (2016) found that university students who had experience with the formal use of WhatsApp to support their learning, and those who had no experience with the use of WhatsApp for learning had positive perceptions of its use to support teaching and learning. Examples of reported possible advantages for the use of WhatsApp included: providing immediate messaging support, bringing new opportunities of learning, facilitating communication between students and teachers, enabling fast feedback in learning, providing flexible learning, supporting multimedia learning, and supporting collaborative learning. However, the participants said that the use of WhatsApp in their learning might interfere with their private lives.

With regard to WhatsApp activities and its educational benefits to students' learning, Turgay and Keskin (2016) examined the effect of using WhatsApp activities in undergraduate EFL speaking classes on students' speaking anxiety, and their feelings about the activities conducted. Thirty-nine undergraduate level participants

carried out the tasks through WhatsApp in EFL speaking courses for four weeks. Participants' views on the mobile application activities were also examined through face-to-face interviews. Results showed that WhatsApp experiences significantly affected students' language learning by lowering EFL speaking anxiety. Similarly, the findings of Mar and Christine (2013) revealed that most students were highly satisfied with using WhatsApp in learning and revealed that WhatsApp increased their willingness to read in English. It also left positive impact on their reading habits which in turn enhanced their confidence.

Minalla (2018) sought to explore the possibility of utilizing WhatsApp Group to enhance EFL learners' verbal interaction. Minalla divided the students into two groups who were taught the content using the traditional approach combined with WhatsApp Chat groups via text message as communicative platforms for practicing outside classroom contexts. The participants of experimental group were restrictively interacted via voice messages while the participants of control group were only interacted via text messages. Results revealed that the participants who received the voice messages on WhatsApp treatment significantly outperformed those who received text messages on WhatsApp.

Mistar and Amin Embi (2016) examined students' perceptions to using WhatsApp as a learning tool to enhance language learning of 20 students from Kuala Pilah Pre-University. The results indicated that WhatsApp helped the students learn the language better and enhanced their English language proficiency. The researchers also indicated that WhatsApp should be used to encourage institutions to provide internet facilities as a top priority in today's education, to invest in this application as a means to improve students' confidence in learning and using the language.

Aicha (2014) sought to explore the impact of using WhatsApp mobile learning activities on the achievement and attitudes of online students at the university. Specifically, this study compares an independent sample of students in an experimental group,15 students, with a control group, 15 students, at a university class. The e-learning process of the experimental group is based on

WhatsApp mobile learning activities while the e-learning process of the control group is without WhatsApp mobile learning activities and receives only face-to-face learning in the classroom. The results of the experiment showed that the experimental group, which uses mobile learning through WhatsApp mobile instant messaging, performed better than the control group on the achievement test following the experimental period. The attitudes of the students suggested that WhatsApp instant messaging made learning easy, favored problem solving and resolved learning difficulties, related to the learning process or to learning content distributed through WhatsApp, knowledge sharing.

Aifan (2015) found that the most frequently used social media tool among students at King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, was WhatsApp, whereas YouTube came second and Twitter came third. Furthermore, students reported facing two major obstacles when utilizing social media. First, some of the social media content was against the students' religion. The second obstacle was related to concerns about privacy and security issues when using social media.

Purpose of the study

When teachers effectively integrate mobile learning technologies in their teaching, they can create engaging learning environments, especially as today students have already adopted mobile phones in their lives and use it increasingly for social interaction. Mobile phones as a result, allow students to communicate anytime anywhere they go. What makes this possible is the abundance of mobile apps specifically designed for language learning. Instructors everywhere can use a variety of mobile applications to facilitate students' learning and initiate a real purpose for communication. Hence, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) To identify the use of WhatsApp as a learning tool by a group of students in EFL practicum, (b) To identify students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp.

Statement of the problem

According to the aforementioned literature review, WhatApps has several educational benefits,

including creating strong social ties between students and teachers, and overall, students are more positive towards the learning environment. Added to this, wherever we go inside today universities, one can eyewitness students sit with their smartphones ignoring the presence of others. The popularity of the best –seller smartphones among university students might suggest that they would be suitable and valuable tools which could be used for educational purposes. Furthermore, the mobile chat applications have no barriers with regard to age group, nativity, social status and economic status as these can be used for free.

Regardless of these promising benefits, mobile phones are seen by many teachers only as means for recreation and entertainment and not for learning. For example, Yeboah and Ewur (2014) found that most participants in their study used WhatsApp for chatting while only 7% reported using it for academic work. Ramakrishnan and Johnsi Priya (2016) as well, found that although WhatsApp ranks top among all the other applications, 96.33% of students have chat with classmates and less than 1 % of students have chat with teachers.

Furthermore, some teachers even oppose the use of smartphones at school claiming that these smartphones are distractive and therefore reduce attention and concentration in class. So (2016), for example, found that university students who had experience with the formal use of WhatsApp said that the use of WhatsApp in their learning might interfere with their private lives. By the same token, several experimental studies have examined the effect of using WhatsApp in several subjects, but little research has explored the impact of using these applications in ELT practicum. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate ELT students' use of WhatsApp and their perceptions regarding its possible integration into their practicum course.

Significance of the Study

Higher educational institutions cannot ignore the role of technology in fulfilling their strategic mission and in responding to the expectations of a diverse student body in many aspects. Lohnes and Kinzer (2007) argued that faculty need to

have greater perspectives of the Net Generation technology expertise and how student learning is connected with technology as this is an essential component for higher education institutions. Based on the knowledge of the researcher, there were no studies conducted on students' perceptions towards the use of WhatsApp application in the Palestinian context, in particular at QOU. This research gap led the researcher to conduct the present study on the EFL students' perception to the use of WhatsApp as a learning tool in the practicum course. Exploring such perceptions will provide Palestinian education system, particularly at QOU, with resources that help the instructors deal with the Net Generation and help them utilize these innovative tools to improve students' learning.

Findings of this study may also help the instructors change their attitudes towards the adoption of WhatsApp in order to improve students' learning in practicum. Additionally, the findings may help the instructors to expand their 21st century information and technical knowledge and skills in order to keep up with knowledge pace of their students.

ELT Practicum at QOU

Practicum is considered an essential strategy for preparing students to be competent teachers. It is a pre-service teacher educational program. The practicum course at QOU seeks to provide an opportunity for the student teachers to practice the most important concepts, principles and educational theories in real teaching contexts at schools. This practice aims at providing the student teachers with good opportunities to acquire the required educational competencies to be competent teachers in the future. To achieve such objectives, student teachers are required to spend six weeks (150) hours at a nearby school where they practice a variety of roles under the supervision of a cooperative teacher and a university practicum supervisor. The course consists of three main stages:

1. Observation Stage: at this stage, the student teacher is expected to spend one week (25 hours) at the cooperative school where he/she is given the chance and the required support

to observe different in-class and outside practices and activities such as: observing disciplinary procedures, school management, staff meetings, ordering and ranking students, attending meetings and so forth.

2. Participation stage: the student teacher spends two weeks (50 hours) practicing educational tasks and activities inside and outside the classroom. For example, he/she is advised to participate in school committees along with their activities, write and conduct lesson plans, prepare worksheets, take class attendance, etc. Such participation can be performed independently or with the help of the cooperative teacher. At the beginning of this stage, the university practicum supervisor visits the student to give guidelines and orientation that can help the student improve the educational practices and engage in the school's activities.

3. Actual practice: This is the most important stage as it consists of the actual practices of teaching, because at this final stage student teachers are expected to be familiar with the multi tasks of a classroom teacher. At this stage, which lasts for three weeks (75 hours), the student teacher is given the opportunity to practice teaching in real contexts, where he/she plans, develops behavioral objectives, teaches, uses different methods of teaching, uses different types of audiovisual aids, evaluates, and gives feedback. During this stage, the faculty member visits the student teacher for the second time in order to evaluate and assess his/her performance in class.

Context and Participants

The context of the present study was Al-Quds Open University (QOU), which has 21 branches in Palestine, including Nablus Branch. The participants were 30 senior English Major Students (28 females and 2 males) who were enrolled in EFL practicum, in Nablus Branch, during the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018. They are all Arabic native students who have studied English as a foreign language for 6 years at governmental schools and nearly 4 years at QOU. The students were selected purposefully and based on voluntary willingness. The researcher was the academic supervisor of this EFL practicum course.

Instruments and Data Collection

To achieve the objectives of the study, a mixed research method was employed using multiple sources of data collection including a questionnaire, semi-structured focus-group and phone interviews via WhatsApp. The study was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2017 /2018. A 28- item questionnaire was used that was adapted and developed based on several previous studies. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated through Cornbach Alpha formula and it was (0.88.8), which is acceptable for the purpose of the study. In addition to the 28 items, the questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions that requested students to express additional comments or ideas related to WhatsApp use. The first question was "Do you think that WhatsApp can be used to help you succeed in practicum? How?" While the second was, "Do you have other comments / thoughts regarding using WhatsApp as an educational tool to support learning of practicum?

At the end of the course and after all students finished their practicum training at the cooperating schools, the researcher, who was the instructor of the course, sent a message that requested students to attend a wrap-up meeting at the university. During this meeting, the questionnaire was completed by 27 students who attended the meeting. The questionnaire took between 15-20 minutes to complete. The other three students completed the questionnaire and sent it to the researcher (the instructor) via the academic portal of QOU. The meeting lasted for 90 minutes and covered the students experience in the course and their positive and negative comments. At the end of the meeting the researcher asked 7 volunteers to participate in a focus group session which lasted for 50 minutes.

Two volunteer students helped the researcher register the answers.

Two days later, seven personal interviews were conducted using WhatsApp voice calls. The interviews were with a randomly selected sub-sample of students chosen from the participants, in order to enrich the quantitative and qualitative data. The questions were predetermined and directed to them after they took the same scale. They were interviewed about the feelings they experienced during the practicum procedures. It is worth mentioning here that both the focus group session and the interviews were conducted in the students' native language, Arabic, to give the students more freedom and more comfort to express their feelings and opinions.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using (SPSS) in the form of means and standard deviations to answer the main question of the study. For analytical purposes, the following scale was used to represent the estimation level of students' responses.

4.5 and above: Very High, 4 – 4.49: High, 3.50 – 3.99: Medium, 3 - 3.49: Low less than 3 : Very Low

Results and Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the perceptions of EFL students towards WhatsApp and its potential benefits in ELT Practicum at Al-Quds Open University. To achieve these objectives, the quantitative results will be presented first, followed by the qualitative results obtained from the focus group session and personal interviews. Firstly, the quantitative data were analyzed in accordance with the study questions as follows:

♦ Results related to the First Question. What are the perceptions of EFL students towards WhatsApp in practicum? To answer this question, means and standard deviations were used and the results are shown in Table (1).

Table (1):

Means and Standard Deviations of perceptions of EFL students towards WhatsApp Use in practicum in a descending order, according to the means.

Rank	No.	Item	Means	standard deviations	Estimation level
1.	22	WhatsApp allowed me to send and receive images, video, audio and messages to my supervisor at no cost.	4.70	0.53	Very High
2.	1	WhatsApp enabled me to communicate with my supervisor about the practicum requirements.	4.70	0.46	Very High
3.	28	WhatsApp allowed for all time availability of the supervisor to facilitate immediate discussion.	4.66	0.47	Very High
4.	17	I think using WhatsApp in practicum was helpful.	4.66	0.47	Very High
5.	4	WhatsApp helped me to lower my anxiety during interaction with my supervisor.	4.63	0.49	Very High
6.	10	WhatsApp helped me to arrange for the two visits conducted by the supervisor.	4.63	0.49	Very High
7.	11	WhatsApp enabled me to send samples of lessons plans and visual aids done by me.	4.60	0.67	Very High
8.	7	Generally, I would like to use WhatsApp in the educational process.	4.56	0.50	Very High
9.	27	I suggest a WhatsApp group for the practicum course next semester.	4.53	0.81	Very High
10.	12	WhatsApp enabled me to feel comfortable when chatting with my supervisor.	4.53	0.50	Very High
11.	5	WhatsApp helped me to inquire about meetings and assignments.	4.53	0.50	Very High

Rank	No.	Item	Means	standard deviations	Estimation level
12.	2	WhatsApp enabled me to send videos about my teaching practices to the supervisor.	4.53	0.77	Very High
13.	23	WhatsApp enabled me to debate ideas and exchange opinions with my supervisors and classmates.	4.50	0.68	Very High
14.	20	WhatsApp allowed me to academically engage with my supervisor and classmates anytime any place.	4.46	0.68	High
15.	8	WhatsApp enabled me to get immediate feedback from my supervisor.	4.43	0.67	High
16.	19	WhatsApp enabled me to use live phone and instant message communications with my classmates and the supervisors.	4.40	0.49	High
17.	26	I think that using WhatsApp for learning purposes improved my academic performance.	4.40	0.85	High
18.	14	WhatsApp helped me to receive announcements from the supervisor.	4.36	0.66	High
19.	6	Using WhatsApp reduced my shyness when communicating with my supervisor.	4.33	0.80	High
20.	24	WhatsApp enabled me to express my opinions and thoughts more freely than in face- to –face discussions with my supervisor.	4.33	0.92	High
21.	25	WhatsApp helped me to learn collaboratively with those who have similar courses.	4.30	0.79	High
22.	13	WhatsApp enabled me to communicate with my classmates about practicum requirements.	4.30	0.65	High
23.	15	WhatsApp enabled me to discuss ideas about the course with my classmates.	4.20	0.76	High
24.	21	WhatsApp helped me to increase my confidence level.	4.16	0.74	High
25.	16	WhatsApp enabled me to seek help from students who are taking practicum.	4.10	0.80	High
26.	9	WhatsApp helped me to communicate with the cooperative teacher after school day.	4.06	0.98	High
27.	3	WhatsApp enabled me to share texts and messages with my classmates.	3.96	1.03	Medium
28.	18	I think that using WhatsApp in practicum caused some social problems.	1.90	0.99	Very Low
		Total Degree	4.34	0.34	High

Table (1) shows that the total degree of students' perceptions of WhatsApp in practicum was high (4.34). The highest mean was given to the item" WhatsApp allowed me to send and receive images, video, audio and messages from my supervisor at no cost" which scored(4.70). On the other hand, the lowest mean was given to the item "I think that using WhatsApp in practicum caused some social problems" which scored (1.99). The quantitative data analysis above suggests a high level of positive perceptions of WhatsApp after experiencing its potentials in practicum. Furthermore, the overall responses and the high total degree of students' perceptions reveal that WhatsApp experience significantly impacted the students' awareness of the benefits of this smartphone application in ELT practicum. This might be due to the fact that students were able to communicate with the supervisor anytime anywhere for educational purposes to ask for support or help. In this respect, the supervisor used to send some encouraging words and expressions at certain times to build a good rapport with the participating students and pave the way for extra evaluative feedback. This feedback greatly helped the students according to their comments and responses in the focus group and the personal interviews. The result regarding students' positive perceptions of WhatsApp practicum aligns with the findings of other studies (e.g. Gasaymeh, 2017; Malecela, 2016; Ngaleka and Uys, 2013).

As shown in Table 1, the highest means were given to the items 22, 1, 28, 17, 4, 10, 11, 7, 27, 12, 5, 2 and 23 respectively. These high means indicate that the participants believe that WhatsApp was helpful since it enabled them to send and receive images, video, audio and messages to the supervisor at no cost. They used WhatsApp to communicate with the supervisor regarding the practicum requirements, send samples of lessons plans, visual aids and videos on teaching practices. This result is consistent with Mistar & Amin Embi (2016) who indicated that WhatsApp provides various functions, for instance text messages, audio files, attached images, and link to any websites and video files, which can be shared. The result is also consistent with Amshah and Thabian (2017) who found that WhatsApp was the second preferred social media tool among Jordanian students for sending text messages, pictures, music and videos. The result is also in line with Ida Sanjaya (2012) who indicated that the majority of users are interested in using WhatsApp application because it provides facilities such as sharing information in the form of audios, videos, images.

One of the major benefits revealed by the students was their willingness and motivation to collaborate and communicate with the instructor /supervisor in formal & informal way unlike the traditional pedagogic limits and constraints of a typical classroom. This benefit created an intrinsic motivation within students who felt that they were guided and supported by the supervisor, most of the time, through WhatsApp, besides face-to–face meetings and the two visits of the practicum. Furthermore, WhatsApp empowered students and allowed them to interact with their peers in the process of practicum learning and to provide each other assistance, guidance, support and feedback when necessary. This complementary role seems to be in line with Sharples, & Vavoula,(2007) who claimed that Smartphones provide students with the ability to learn outside a classroom environment where the students is the center of learning.

Through WhatsApp application, students were able to exchange with the supervisor and with their classmates a great number of images, instant picture, videos, comments, feedback , announcements, learning resources, links, worksheets and exams and so on . All of these visual and verbal interactions were practiced beyond the formal educational setting as mentioned previously. For example as shown in their high responses to item number 24 "WhatsApp enabled me to express my opinions and thoughts more freely than in face- to –face discussions with my supervisor", "WhatsApp encouraged them to participate more freely and more actively to express their ideas and exchange opinions with the supervisor". However, students' interaction and communication with the supervisor and the peers as well was made in Arabic as it was somehow difficult for them to use English, as their English proficiency was quite limited outside the university walls.

The result, however, is not in line with So (2016) who found that university students who had experience with the formal use of WhatsApp to support their learning, said that the use of WhatsApp might interfere with their private lives.

♦ Results related to the second question: What are the benefits gained by students of ELT practicum by using WhatsApp? Students answered this question via the focus group session and the personal interviews through WhatsApp voice call. Furthermore, the researcher examined the types of materials sent by the students to the supervisor (the researcher himself) via WhatsApp messenger during the application of the study to conclude the benefits.

All students reported that WhatsApp enabled them to send videos, pictures and photos , messages, inquiries, samples of teaching practices, links, lesson plans , worksheets, etc. The quantitative analysis of data revealed that the highest mean of students' responses was the item number 22 " WhatsApp allowed me to send and receive images, video, audio and messages to my supervisor at no cost " which scored (4.70).

The material and the activities sent to the researcher's WhatsApp were examined in terms of quality and quantity. Data were collected from students' messages in these accounts over a period of three months which covered the 30 required days of practicum application at the collaborating

school. The researcher archived and stored in files all the text messages, verbal and visual materials for later classification and analysis. For the preliminary analysis of the data, all the data were read through to obtain a general sense of the information and to understand what kind of benefits emerged through using WhatsApp. During this process, students' messages were analyzed by using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Consequently, categories were generated as shown in Table (2) below:

Table (2):

Types of materials sent via WhatsApp and their percentages.

Type of material	Number	Percentage
Visual aids	224	29.78
Text messages	181	24.07
Pictures	79	10.50
Videos	35	4.65
Lesson plans	42	5.59
Sample extracts of teaching practices	43	5.72
Worksheets/ exams.	28	3.72
Voice calls	63	8.38
Miscellaneous	57	7.58
Total	**752**	**100**

Table (2) reveals that the students used the WhatsApp application to send different types of materials and activities when communicated with the supervisor. The total number of these activities was 752. The highest number and percentage was the visual aids either made or used by the students in their practicum. Students in this regard sent 224 samples of visual aids that they used within the 30 days of their practicum. Such high percentage indicates that these students were active users of WhatsApp and they were interested in using visual aids to enhance pupils' learning. The lowest number and percentage was that of worksheets and exams .This low percentage might be due to the fact that most students taught young students from 1st to 4th grade where exams are rare and too many worksheets are not approved by the Ministry of Education nowadays. Such results are in line with the quantitative results achieved through the questionnaire and the qualitative

results achieved through the focus group session and the personal interviews conducted via the WhatsApp voice call. All in all , these results are in line with those of Amshah and Thabian (2017, Mistar & Amin Embi (2016), Ida Sanjaya (2012) who stated that WhatsApp provides various functions, for instance text messages, audio files, attached images, link to any websites and video files which can be shared.

Qualitative results

In addition to the 28- item questionnaire, a semi-structured focus group and phone interviews via WhatsApp were used to collect some qualitative data that complement the quantitative data. Overall, students' responses to the interviews and the focus group questions support the results of the questionnaire analysis. Their responses showed that the use of WhatsApp was received positively by seven female students who were interviewed via the WhatsApp call service. One student, for example mentioned that WhatsApp greatly helped her to improve her self-confidence especially when communicating with the supervisor .This student added that it was possible for her to call the supervisor nearly for free to inquire about some information, mainly the dates of the two visits to the cooperative school. Another student who lives far from the university said that using WhatsApp saved time, effort and money when she was able to communicate with the supervisor and with her classmates. She asked for information and inquired about the best way to teach a particular lesson from the textbook "English for Palestine."

The focus group data showed that all students stated that WhatsApp increased the level of their interaction with the supervisor which helped to break the fear barrier and helped the student to be more comfortable even in the presence of the supervisor at the school. Their overall responses and comments indicated that the students felt that WhatsApp helped them to be more engaged and active in practicum. Second, the students reported that this experience gave them a chance to exchange ideas, lesson plans, videos, English songs related to the EFP textbook and visual aids, thus enabling them to teach better. The overall responses in the focus group indicated that the students were

mostly enthusiastic towards using WhatsApp in their practicum course and this enthusiasm contributed to their successful collaboration and communication with the supervisor and their classmates as well.

The interviews conducted via WhatsApp calling service revealed that the students approved using a WhatsApp closed group next time so as to use it for posting materials and information about the practicum course. This group should involve students in previous practicum courses and recent students to exchange ideas and experiences. The supervisor himself should administer this group, according to most students, while two students stated that one or two students can help the supervisor to be joint-admins. In this respect, three students reported that WhatsApp groups are more convenient and less troubling than Facebook groups and helps students to benefit more.

Some students expressed favorable attitudes towards the use of peer-centered interaction and collaboration with their classmates as well as with other students who took the practicum course in previous courses. Such comments go in line with the items number 3, 13, 15, 16, 18, 23 , 25. These items received high means of estimated levels of perceptions among students. One student said in the focus group, "WhatsApp enabled us to support each other when we exchanged information, opinions and practicum related resources including lesson plans, worksheets and visual aids related to "English for Palestine" textbooks." A second student responded enthusiastically by saying "I benefited a lot from the features of WhatsApp especially the use of free voice calls, which enabled me to chat with my classmates for hours during the application stages of practicum and after".

Conclusion and recommendations

The quantitative and qualitative results of this study revealed that WhatsApp was helpful in ELT practicum and enabled the students to accomplish educational outcomes and the requirements of the course in several ways. WhatsApp provided faster and easier communication among students and with the supervisor, and promoted sharing ideas. It allowed the students to express thoughts and

ideas via various features of WhatsApp platform such as pictures, videos, web-links, recorded videos and many more. It also helped the students to be actively engaged in e-learning activities via the various features of this application.

In light of the study results, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Faculty members and university supervisors should be encouraged to utilize WhatsApp group in practicum to enable students to use it for educational purposes via their smartphones.

2. Al-Quds Open University should organize training programs, workshops, and online training to train faculty members on how to utilize WhatsApp in blended learning.

3. Al-Quds Open University should organize training programs and workshops for students to train them on how to utilize WhatsApp in their learning.

4. Further studies may add a few aspects such as skills, knowledge and problems faced by the students in using WhatsApp application.

5. Further research should include cooperative teachers & supervisors' perceptions of WhatsApp and its benefits in practicum of different specializations and courses at Al-Quds Open University.

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