

Writing the WhatsApp Way!

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Abstract—The pupils in this 21st century era are the members of Generation Z and Alpha who witness the rapid development of technologies. In order to cater the learning needs of these generations, WhatsApp, a mobile messaging app was chosen in this study as the technological tool to teach narrative writing. This study attempted to explore the perception of Year 6 pupils towards the use of WhatsApp in narrative writing and challenges that they encountered in learning narrative writing through WhatsApp. Eight Year 6 pupils from one primary school in Jempol were involved in this case study and the data were collected using document analysis, focus group interviews and field notes. The findings revealed that all the participants perceived WhatsApp as engaging, easy and convenient, served as language support, provided peer feedback and support and increased confidence in English. The challenges that they encountered were financial constraint, physical distraction and mobile phone constraint. The findings of this study are hoped to provide insights to the educators on the integration of mobile messaging apps in language learning.

Keywords— Education, WhatsApp, Narrative writing, MALL

I. INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a second language (ESL) in all Malaysian primary and secondary schools and the mastery of English is essential for pupils to gain access to information and knowledge written in English [1]. Living in this 21st century era, the pupils are the members of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, also known as ‘Digital Natives’ which is referred as the ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computer who grow up witnessing the widespread of electronic gadgets and digital technologies [2].

Considering the learning needs of these digital natives, the writing module in the English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools stated that the pupils are expected to utilize all ICT resources in searching for relevant information and communicating with friends/teacher regarding their writing matter. This is in line with Shift 7 in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 which aims to maximize the use of ICT for distance and self-paced learning to expand access to high-quality teaching regardless of location or student skill level. The Ministry of Education also emphasizes that being able to write effectively is an essential skill for Year 6 pupils as writing is tested in the national examination, Primary School Assessment Test (UPSR). However, writing has often been

viewed as one of the most difficult and complex skills to master, even if it is done in one’s mother tongue [3]. In the Malaysian context, it could be concluded that the standard of English among Malaysian children is on the decline despite learning English for several years and they are still weak in English, especially in their writing skills [4]. This is because writing in second language (L2) is a difficult skill to acquire as it involves more than just putting correct grammatical forms together and L2 writers have less language knowledge and confidence that often lead them to struggle with the L2 and writing skills in general [5].

Several studies have been conducted to explore the perceptions and attitudes of tertiary and secondary students towards the use of WhatsApp in learning. The previous findings yielded positive results as students posited that WhatsApp promoted a collaborative and cooperative learning environment with lecturers and classmates [6], enabled students to share information and comment ideas within peers [7], WhatsApp is easy and convenient to be used [3], useful for language support [8], and WhatsApp encouraged students to join in group discussions more than when being in a traditional classroom as everyone has equal chance to participate [9].

Based on the aforementioned literature review on the students’ perceptions on the use of WhatsApp in learning, all the studies reviewed only revolved around the setting of tertiary and secondary contexts and so far, there has not been any study conducted for primary school context on the use of WhatsApp in the teaching of writing. Therefore, this paper attempted to seek findings on the effects WhatsApp in teaching narrative writing to the primary school Year 6 pupils. Data were gathered qualitatively to answer the following research questions.

- What is the pupils’ perception towards the use of WhatsApp in narrative writing?
- What are the challenges that the pupils encountered in learning narrative writing through WhatsApp?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Narrative Writing

One of the commonest text types that children are expected to use early on in their school life is the narrative [10]. This is

because students are naturally inclined to write stories of their interests more than other types of writing [11]. Narrative writing can be defined as a story writing or report of events, personal experiences, or any similar incidents, whether they are real or fictitious [11]. Narrative writing contains a sequence of events together with characters and setting [12]. Narratives, like all text type, have a purpose which may be to entertain or teach [10]. Narratives have a particular organizational structure which consists of orientation, events, complication and resolution [10]. For orientation, its purpose is to set the scene, introduce the characters and provide details of who, when and where. Then, there are number of events that lead to some kind of problems which is referred to as complication. Finally, the problem is resolved in the final part of the story, which is the resolution.

There are also typical linguistic features common to narratives. First, narratives are sequenced in time and this is often signaled by the conjunctions or connectives that used such as one day, the next day and at last. Second, the tense use is usually past tense as narratives often narrate events that have already happened. Third, narratives use many action verbs that describe what people do such as threw, climbed and stood. Lastly, narratives often contain dialogue, and so they also contain "saying" verbs that explain how people speak such as said, replied and shouted. In this study, the topic of WhatsApp discussion revolved on 'bully' in which the pupils discussed on the scene of bully, the characters in the scene, the events that lead to bully and the complications as well as the resolution which stopped the bullying.

B. Mobile Learning

M-learning or mobile learning is a new stage in the development of e-learning and distance learning. Mobile learning or M-learning refers to the capabilities that mobile technology devices have brought to a physical classroom context as well as to the activities of students as they participate in learning institutions [13]. There is an increase use of wireless technologies in education all over the world and wireless technologies such as laptop computers and mobile phones are revolutionizing education and transforming the traditional classroom-based learning and teaching into anytime and anywhere education [14].

The strengths of mobile learning lie primarily in the use of learning programs not dependent on time or place, that are in the extremely efficient use of the available time. Mobile devices have become more affordable, effective and easy to use as they can extend the benefits of e-learning system [15]. Through these devices, pupils will have the opportunities to access vast materials in the internet, learn in a collaborative environment and obtain instant evaluation and feedback from teachers.

C. MALL

The implications of M-learning have significantly contributed to the field of language teaching as MALL is then proposed, an acronym for mobile-assisted language learning. MALL can be defined as an approach to language learning that is assisted or enhanced through the use of a handheld mobile device [16]. MALL is a subset of both Mobile Learning (m-learning) and Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and could support the retention and utilization of newly-

acquired language skills of the learners. Since the mid-1990s, MALL has focused on the exploitation of five mobile technologies: pocket electronic dictionaries, personal digital assistants (PDAs), mobile phones, MP3 players, and most recently ultra-portable tablet PCs [17].

In the context of English language learning, studies have shown that technologies especially the use of mobile devices does bring positive impacts in improving English language proficiency [18]. For learning English as second language, mobile phone is a good media for drills and practices for vocabulary, English expressions, and practices in English communication thus, mobile technology could act as an efficient mediator for enhancing English language learning as well as supporting the students' target needs of their English language courses [18].

D. WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a free cross-platform messaging app with a focus on privacy, security and speed [19]. WhatsApp is chosen in this study for three main reasons. First, WhatsApp is a free app with no ads and subscription fees which means that the app can be downloaded easily without the need to purchase and users are not bound to any contract of use. Second, it can be accessed via smartphones, tablets and computers and users can log in to the WhatsApp across all these multiple platforms simultaneously. Third, WhatsApp has no limits on the size of media and chats which allows users to share an unlimited number of photos, videos and any files of any format of up to 2GB each.

A study evaluated on the functionalities of WhatsApp in supporting mobile learning in terms of media richness showed that WhatsApp has better performance on content richness, which refers to the ability in delivering information across various media types as compared to other mediums as well as better in content accuracy, which looks at the degree of the information that could be easily expressed and understand and content adaptability, which refers to the adaptation of the information to other formats [20]. Thus, the researchers concluded that developers and designers of an m-learning environment could adopt WhatsApp as a suitable information delivery medium to support corresponding learning activities in a mobile learning environment.

E. Past Studies

Number of studies have been conducted focusing on the students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of WhatsApp in learning from the context of Malaysian tertiary and secondary students.

A study investigated the perceptions of 150 diploma students on the use of WhatsApp group in class-related information sharing through academic discussions found that WhatsApp could be a platform to promote a collaborative and cooperative learning environment with lecturers and classmates as well as help to boost up the students' confident level in voicing out opinion instead of face-to-face interactions [6]. Similarly, the attitudes of 30 higher education institutions students were examined towards WhatsApp mobile learning and the results indicated that 83.3% of the students felt that WhatsApp had greatly increased their learning interests and motivation while 73.3% posited that WhatsApp enabled them to share information and comment ideas within peers [7].

Another study examined the significance of WhatsApp as learning tool based on the perceptions of 20 pre-university students and the students perceived WhatsApp as easy to be used and they would not stop using WhatsApp in their future language learning [8]. Six advantages were identified in the use of WhatsApp as a tool for promoting writing to 32 diploma students; WhatsApp was useful for language support, as a platform for exchanging opinions, easy and convenient, engaging, provided peer feedback and support as well as increased confidence in English [3]. The experiences and perceptions of 57 secondary school students were explored on the use of WhatsApp for communication and learning and the results showed that 54% agreed that the presence of a teacher in the WhatsApp group helped to enhance their comprehension on the subject and 63% agreed that being online via WhatsApp encouraged them to join in group discussions more than when being in a traditional classroom as everyone has equal chance to participate [9].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Setting and Participants

This study is a case study conducted in one primary school in Jempol, Negeri Sembilan. Eight Year 6 pupils, consisted of four boys and four girls aged 12 years old who own a smartphone with mobile data subscription and WhatsApp account were selected as the participants. In terms of English proficiency level, the marks of the latest English comprehension examination indicated that two of the pupils are considered as high proficient, four are at average level and another two are low proficient.

B. Data Collection Tools

The intervention phase was conducted for 2 weeks with approximately 20-hour of total engagement in learning narrative writing through WhatsApp. Three data collection tools were used; document analysis (DA), focus group interviews (FGI) and researcher's field notes (RFN). The WhatsApp thread on the discussion of narrative writing was analyzed focusing on the participants' engagement and sentence structures while field notes were taken simultaneously. After the intervention phase, focus group interviews were conducted to explore on the pupils' perceptions. The data collected were then transcribed and analyzed.

C. WhatsApp Intervention

The teaching of narrative writing using WhatsApp adopted the 'The Curriculum Cycle' proposed by Derewianka (1990). This Cycle outlines four stages through which a particular text type can be made explicit to students and each stage has a particular teaching purpose [10]. The topic for the narrative writing is 'bully'.

Stage 1: Building the field

The focus of this stage is on the content or information of the text as to ensure that pupils would have enough background knowledge of the topic and be able to write about it. The intervention began by asking the pupils to search the pictures of bully in the internet and shared them in the WhatsApp group. Then, they identified the types of bully shown in the pictures as well as discussed on other examples of bully that

they might have experienced or seen. The pupils also elaborated on the reasons or factors that lead to bully.

Stage 2: Modelling the text type

This stage aims to build up pupils' understanding of the purpose, overall structure and language features of the particular text type that the pupils will write. In order to model the text type, the pupils were provided with notes expansion which contain pictures and related vocabulary. The pupils were also prompted with questions related to the notes.

Stage 3: Joint construction

This stage is teacher-guided in which teacher and pupils write a text together and its focus is to illustrate the process of writing a text, considering both the content and the language. During the process, the pupils constructed sentences based on prompts posed by the teacher. Any errors in the pupils' sentences were immediately corrected by the teacher and other group members.

Stage 4: Independent writing

This is the final stage of the cycle where pupils write their own texts individually. After the pupils have understood the language errors made and corrected the sentences, they have to write the narrative essay individually and submit the essay personally to the teacher's number, not in the WhatsApp group.

IV. RESULT & DISCUSSION

A. Pupils' Perception towards the Use of WhatsApp in Narrative Writing

According to the open-ended responses from the participants in the FGI, the observation in the RFN as well as the DA of the WhatsApp thread, several advantages of using WhatsApp as a writing tool in learning narrative writing were identified and placed under five themes; (1) language support, (2) ease and convenience, (3) engaging, (4) peer feedback and support and (5) increased confidence to use English.

Language Support

The pupils found that WhatsApp was useful for vocabulary enhancement as they were able to learn and gain new vocabulary when other pupils shared the meaning of the new words in the WhatsApp group. The pupils also responded that through WhatsApp, they were able to read others' sentences that have been corrected by the teacher thus, helped them to construct their own sentences without taking too much time to think. They also added that when reading others' sentences, they could get better ideas for their writing. In comparison to before they joined this study, they commented that they were always stuttered and hesitated on how to begin writing an essay. Fortunately, being able to utilize WhatsApp as the writing tool, they felt that they were much clearer on the ideas and sentence structures that should be used based on the discussion in the WhatsApp group.

"I feel happy... because I can learn new words when my friends share the meaning in the (WhatsApp) group." (B2)

"I can read my friends' sentences... (so) I can finish the essay faster." (G2)

"(Before this) I was stuttered to write a sentence, now I get (many) ideas for my writing." (G1)

Ease and Convenience

The pupils found that WhatsApp was easy and convenient to be used as a platform to practice writing. They agreed that WhatsApp allowed them to trace back all the discussion in the group if they wanted to read others' sentences or the meaning of the words shared by other participants without worrying that they may be left behind during the discussion. They also stated that it was easy to write using WhatsApp as compared to the conventional way of using pencil as WhatsApp allowed them to delete any typos that they made rather than using eraser to rub off their errors when writing using pencil. Apart of that, one pupil commented that it was easy for him to learn writing through WhatsApp as he could discuss with other pupils in the group at anytime and anywhere without the need to present physically at one place. From the technical aspect of WhatsApp, the pupils perceived WhatsApp as easy and convenient because they can share images in the group and save directly into their phone without the need to search for the same images from the internet.

"Easy to check back (the discussion)" (G3)

"It was easy (to use WhatsApp)... because I can delete (the messages)" (B3)

"I will not feel tired to write (anymore)... just need to type" (B2)

"Even (we) live far from each other, we (still) can learn together." (B1)

Engaging

The pupils found that the use of WhatsApp in narrative writing is engaging due to the quick response received from the members of the group. They agreed that they were engaged with the discussion when instant correction was given to the errors made and compliments were given by the teacher and the members of the group to the correct answers. They were extremely glad when they received instant compliments as the compliments helped to enhance their engagement in the discussion. The pupils also responded that they would feel emotionally stressed and lonely if they were to write an essay alone thus, they stated that WhatsApp allowed them to learn from each other and enjoy the learning as they can play with their phone in a more fun and interactive way.

"I was happy... because I can write with my friends." (B1)

"(It was) fun (to write using WhatsApp)... because if I wrote the essay alone, I feel lonely." (G1)

"When (I answered) wrong, the teacher will correct (me)... and the teacher praised me." (G3)

From the technical aspect of WhatsApp, the pupils perceived WhatsApp as engaging due to the use of emoji available in the app. They agreed that the use of emoji was another crucial factor that engaged them in the discussion. They mentioned that they were excited to use emoji in expressing their feelings or gestures. The most used emoji in the discussion was the 'face with tears of joy' as it was used when the participants perceived one situation as hilarious and funny. The use of emoji was also seen as to complement the text sent so the intended message could be delivered well. In addition, one participant added that she used the 'heart' emoji to replace the phrase 'thank you' and the 'person raising hand'

emoji as a sign to greet the members in the group or say goodbye.

Peer feedback and Support

Apart from receiving feedback and support particularly on language learning, the pupils were also observed to feel more ease to chat with one another freely, even without prompts from the teacher researcher. The pupils responded that WhatsApp was used as the medium to discuss school work given by the teachers and wish birthday to one of the group members using fully English. It was observed that they were able to construct grammatically correct simple sentences as they watched how others spelled the words and used appropriate vocabulary in responding to the topic of discussion.

"(It was) fun because there were (my) friends (in the group)." (B2)

"If (I made) mistakes, the friends will correct (the mistakes)." (G1)

"(I) feel good because (I can) discuss with my friends." (G3)

Increased Confidence to Use English

The pupils found that the use of WhatsApp in narrative writing helped to increase their confidence in using English both in communicating and writing. They agreed that being involved in this study has motivated them to be more confident to speak in English as they challenged themselves to communicate using only English in the WhatsApp group. One pupil even commented that she felt more fluent in the language as she was required to use English outside of the formal English lesson in the classroom. The pupils responded that they did not feel embarrass to make mistakes as they knew that the researcher will correct their mistakes without making them feel intimidated thus, helped to enhance their confidence to use the language. It was observed that the corrective feedback and compliments given by the teacher within the 20-hour of engagement in the WhatsApp group were among the crucial factors that influenced the confidence of the pupils in using English.

"(I) feel brave to speak English with the teacher." (B3)

"(I feel) confident to speak (English) with friends." (G2)

"(I) feel more fluent (in English)." (G4)

"If (I made any) typos, the teacher will correct (the typos)." (G1)

B. Challenges of Using WhatsApp in Learning Narrative Writing

According to the open-ended responses from the pupils in the FGI, the observation in the RFN as well as the DA of the WhatsApp thread in the WhatsApp group, none of the pupils mentioned that they disliked the use of WhatsApp in the learning of narrative writing. However, there were three challenges that the pupils faced in learning narrative writing through the use of WhatsApp; (1) financial constraint, (2) physical distraction and (3) mobile phone constraint.

Financial Constraint

The first challenge encountered by the pupils is financial constraint. In order for the pupils to send and reply messages

through WhatsApp, search images in the internet or download any apps from the online app store, their mobile phones need to subscribe to the mobile data which requires cost. As the pupils are still children and they rely on the pocket money given by the parents, they stated that they struggled financially as they need to subscribe the mobile data with minimum amount of RM5 in order to keep being connected to WhatsApp. One pupil mentioned that he even paid RM30 for the mobile data which was an expensive amount for a child. Apart of that, there was also situation in which one pupil could not join the live WhatsApp discussion as she forgot to subscribe the mobile data, thus required her to trace back all the discussion thread once she was connected to the internet to ensure that she would not be left behind.

"(I) have to buy top up (mobile data)." (G1)

"(I) forgot to top up (subscribe mobile data), so (I) could not join the (WhatsApp) discussion." (B4)

Physical Distraction

The second challenge encountered by the pupils is physical distraction. The intervention phase took about 20-hour of engagement in two weeks, which required the participants to be with their mobile phone for approximately 20 hours in order for them to send and reply messages in the WhatsApp discussion, search images in the internet or download any apps from the online app store. Consequently, dealing with the mobile phone for extended hours had taken a toll on the pupils' physical conditions. The pupils agreed that their body became strained as the result of staring at the phone screen and being in one position such as sitting without moving for quite some time. The brightness from the phone screen was also another factor that distracted their vision thus, made their eyes tired. One pupil also added that after the WhatsApp discussion session had ended, he felt fatigue and sleepy as he had to work with the mobile phone for more than an hour continuously.

"(I) feel weak... because (I) stared too long at the phone." (B4)

"My body was strained... because (I) stared too long at the phone." (B2)

"My eyes were sleepy... because I stared at the bright light (of the phone screen)." (G2)

Mobile Phone Constraint

The third challenge encountered by the pupils is mobile phone constraint. As discussed earlier, the pupils were required to be with their mobile phone for approximately 20 hours during the intervention phase. This was not only resulted on the distraction of the pupils' physical condition, but also affected their mobile phones' performance. On average, the WhatsApp discussion took about two hours every day thus, they had to ensure that the battery of the mobile phones was fully charged. However, there were situations when a few of the pupils had to withdraw from the live WhatsApp discussion as the battery of their mobile phone kept getting low and they needed to charge the battery. The pupils were well-informed that it was dangerous for them to use the mobile phone while charging thus, they had to wait until the battery was fully charged before joining back the discussion.

Apart of that, one pupil mentioned that her mobile phone was lagged due to the influx of messages that she received

simultaneously from the members of the WhatsApp group thus, forced her to restart the mobile phone. Similarly, another pupil added that when too many messages sent and images shared in the WhatsApp group simultaneously, he could not keep up with the discussion. As the result, he had to ask the group members to share the images again as he had difficulty to trace back the images shared before.

"(My) handphone hang (lagged)." (B3)

"(The) messages came in too fast, cannot catch up." (B2)

"Battery (of the phone) kept getting low." (G4)

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This small-scale case study explored the perception of Year 6 pupils towards the use of WhatsApp in narrative writing and challenges that they encountered in learning narrative writing through WhatsApp. The findings revealed that all the participants perceived WhatsApp as engaging, easy and convenient, served as language support, provided peer feedback and support and increased confidence in English. The challenges that they encountered were financial constraint, physical distraction and mobile phone constraint. As all the participants perceived WhatsApp positively, it could be used as the technological tool to engage pupils in the learning of English writing. The findings of this study could also shed some lights for the educators on how they can manipulate the use of social media or any digital technologies to engage pupils in a meaningful 21st century language lesson. Nevertheless, educators should be aware on the challenges that the pupils or the educators themselves would encounter in implementing the use of technologies in the teaching and learning in order to ensure the objectives of the lesson could be delivered well and create a meaningful classroom environment.

Finally, this study only focused on the use of one mobile messaging app, WhatsApp in teaching one language skill, writing. Therefore, for future research, educators could experiment with other language skills using other features available on WhatsApp such as audio recording and video recording. Future research could also focus on other mobile messaging apps in the teaching of other language skills and involve larger samples. A longer duration of study may also be needed to ensure reliability.

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