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**English in the palm of your hand: an experience report of using WhatsApp to learn**

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**ABSTRACT**

Smartphones have been part of our daily routines and this fact has changed the way we interact with each other. In addition, it has provided changes in education through Mobile Learning, which is the use of mobile devices to learn in different places and time by learners. According to Oliveira et al (2014), this way of learning provides learners' autonomy, mobility, and flexibility in language learning. Based on that, this article aims to report a mobile learning experience using the WhatsApp application as a tool to create a virtual learning community for forty English learners. The pilot project called "*English in the Palm of your Hand*", was linked to Autonomous Learning Support Base (ALSB), which is the Federal University of Pará's (FUP) language learning laboratory. This research experience lasted three months and it provided activities every week by using digital materials and exploring all the WhatsApp resources such as videos, texts, images, audios and documents. The steps taken in order to organize the course are explained in our methodology; aiming to support those who are interested in creating similar experiences using this application. Although some aspects related to the educational planning and course management should be taken into consideration in order to provide an effective learning experience, the results show

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us that the use of WhatsApp in a mobile learning experience has the potential to increase learners' motivation and autonomy anywhere and anytime.

**Keywords: WhatsApp for Education. English in the Palm of Your Hand. English Language Learning.**

## **1 Introduction**

Smartphones have been common in our daily lives. We can do many things in the palm of our hands. Since the number of smartphones is bigger than computers in Brazil, according to the 29th Annual Administration Research in Information Technology Use, organized by Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) and published in April 2018, we wonder to know the possibilities of these mobile devices in language education. Thus, this article reports an experience of how the WhatsApp Messenger Application can support the English language teaching and learning process, considering our reflections of the challenges and limitations faced.

Rodrigues (2015) and Bottentuit Junior et al. (2016) add to the discussion that the most used application for Brazilians is the WhatsApp Messenger Application. Most people use WhatsApp in their daily lives for personal and work purposes. Due to the fact mentioned above, we started reflecting, “why not bringing it into the foreign language teaching and learning context?”

Meanwhile, in our local context we were reflecting upon how to promote English language use in learners' daily lives. Based on that, we created a project named “*English in the palm of your hand*”. The project is linked to Federal University of Pará's language laboratory and it is an extensional project which uses the WhatsApp as a virtual learning community.

The main objective of this project was to provide learners the practice of English language skills (Speaking, Listening, Writing and Reading).

## **2. Theoretical Background**

In this chapter, we aim to report a theoretical background of mobile learning, their conceptions and characteristics to apply them in our experience.

### **2.1 Mobile Learning**

To Bottentuit Junior and Coutinho (2007), mobile learning is an educational system characterized by the use of mobile devices into the teaching and learning process anywhere and anytime. To Oliveira et al (2014), it presents some advantages to learners as we can see in the chart below:

Table 1 - Advantages of Mobile Learning Practices

Benefits	Descriptions
Autonomy	Organize their own study freely, using internet to search about new contents, avoiding just one source of knowledge (the teacher)
Portability\ Mobility	No need to be in physical spaces of learning such as classrooms. They can send and also receive information wherever and whenever they want to.
More Learning	feel more comfortable to interact with other learners and the teacher to study in his\her favorite mobile device.
Flexibility	Improve his/her relationship with learners. This way, s(he) can interact to each other and supervise their own tasks.

Source: adapted from Oliveira *et al* (2014, p. 3484-5)

Due to these advantages of mobile learning, we decided to apply it in order to support our English language learning and teaching practice through WhatsApp. This choice came from a reflection on the need to use WhatsApp in a different perspective to provide learners' English Language skills development.

## 2.2 Possibilities, challenges and limitations of WhatsApp in Educational Contexts

In the 21st educational context, it is important to experiment new ways of teaching. The world changes fast and if the teacher does not follow it, he or she can become obsolete. Araújo and Bottentuit Junior (2015) mentioned the number of possibilities of using WhatsApp for educational purposes. According to the authors, this application can work not just as a direct communication channel between teacher and learner, providing some information and reducing the distance between the users. In addition to that, authors such as as Rodrigues (2015), Bottentuit Junior and Albuquerque (2016), and Bottentuit Junior *et al* (2016) provide possibilities such as:

- an environment for discussions;

- a feedback for learners;
- a space for file sharing;
- a tool for learner's motivation;
- a way for language practicing.

Besides that, having in mind that many people are familiar with WhatsApp, it does not require us to teach learners how to use it. People know the basic functions as texting messages, sending files (audios, images and documents) and searching for information (SANTOS, COELHO AND CABRAL, 2016; BOTTENTUIT JUNIOR AND ALBUQUERQUE, 2016). By recognizing this, it is possible to consider the use of its resources to promote language practice. Speaking and Listening activities may be done by the audio recorder and video sharing as well as reading and writing activities may be done by sharing documents and text messaging.

However, it is necessary to have a careful planning while using the mobile learning to promote the participants' language development. All the pedagogical choices must be planned in order to promote the participants' smooth adaptation to this experience as it was confirmed by Oliveira *et al* (2014). According to them, WhatsApp offers many possibilities, but it also presents some limitations that may compromise the learning process.

Machado Spencer (2014), Lopes and Vas (2016), Santos, Coelho and Cabral (2016) complement that by stating some limitations which may come out in a mobile experience. We may have some technical and financial limitations which may influence how learners will perform all the activities. Technical limitations (screen size, storage capacity, smartphone models (older and newer, or ownership) and financial limitation (internet mobile plans costs) can interfere in the course application. All these aspects must be taken into consideration in every project using mobile learning. However, it is the role of every teacher to find out if it is possible to apply it into his or her own teaching practice.

In order to explain our experience, we will describe the steps taken in our experience, our challenges and limitations, as well as our reflections on it as it can be seen below.

### **3. Methodology**

As stated before, The “*English in the Palm of your Hand*” is an extensional project linked to the FUP’s language laboratory and designed for beginners. Its main objective is to promote English Language practice using the WhatsApp Messenger Application.

### 3.1 Management

Firstly, we point out that this experience demands a team. The “English in the Palm of your Hand” is composed of 7 members who are divided into four specific management teams, as it can be seen next:

**Table 2 - Work teams**

Team	Task	Number of Members
Pedagogical	Planning, implementing and monitoring the activities in the groups	1
Management	Preparing schedules for the other teams; Monitoring challenges and results.	3
Material designing	Recording and editing videos; Producing audiovisual material such as images, memes and gifs.	2
Supervision and Evaluation	Managing the groups; Getting in touch with the participants who withdrew; Monitoring the experience; Anticipating problems; Proposing solutions.	3

Source: our own

### 3.2 English in the palm of your hand: the project context.

The project was set in the period of twelve weeks, in a virtual English learning community composed by three WhatsApp groups with specific functions that are described on table 3. In these groups, the learners had weekly activities in which they practiced the four language skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking)

#### 3.2.1 Participants

The 40 participants enrolled into the project by completing a survey form available in the ALSB Page on a social media. They were high school and college students from 18 to 36 age group. Concerning their English proficiency level, most of them (38) rated themselves as basic and only two participants considered them in different levels: intermediate level and upper intermediate.

#### 3.2.2 Groups and its functions

There was a time for participants' ambience to our English virtual learning community on WhatsApp during the first week of the experience. They were added to the three WhatsApp groups of the project and received information of how the experience would work as well as the functions of each group.

Table 3 - Our WhatsApp groups

Groups	Function
English in the palm of your hand	Sending instructions, proposing activities and sharing the study materials.
Working hard	The name of the group is a expression in portuguese that means "working hard". Learners to perform the proposed tasks.
Doubts group	Solving learners' doubts as well as giving some tips to improve their learning.

Source: our own

### 3.2.3 Activities

The activities lasted about one hour and a half per week to be done, totalizing a course load of eighteen hours. Learners had to accomplish ninety percent of them in order to obtain a certificate of participation. It is also worth to highlight that learners had the entire week to perform the activities and this allowed them to work on their own time.

### 3.3 Action Research in English in the Palm of your Hand

This work was done in an action research view since teachers- researchers and learners were part of the same study (THIOLLENT, 1985). Teachers-mediators were constantly reflecting upon the experience and working to improve it. For this reason, whenever a challenge appeared during the activities, we were responsible to find out solutions and readily intervene.

Our research was organized into three main stages, as it can be seen next:

- Project planning.
- Data collecting during the experience
- Reflection on research instruments analysis

#### 3.3.1 Research Instruments

The data have been collected on the perspective of the qualitative paradigm (SELIGER; SHOHAMY, 1989) through three forms and several screenshots as it will be described next.

The forms contained semi-structured questions. The first form was administered for participants' enrollment and its questions focused on their personal information, such as age and background studies. However, the main objective with it was to identify learners' proficiency in English and their expectation towards the project.

The second one was designed to provide learners' the opportunity to evaluate the experience and consequently enabled us, teachers-mediators, to work on improvements during the experience. In the third form, learners self-evaluated themselves. There were questions considering their challenges and engagement in the activities, what enabled us again to intervene and guide them towards a better learning experience. In addition, we used

screenshots to log participants' interaction, the development of activities, and the role of mediate-teachers in the groups.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

It is primordial to take into consideration the challenges faced during the experience development, although we are aware that improvements have always been necessary.

The first step was to have great work teams to manage specific areas of the project, which would demand much attention, as it has already been mentioned in our methodology. Still in the planning, we spread some information related to the project on lab's social medias. It clarified some doubts related to the experience such as: i) the participants did not have to pay anything to participate; ii) there was not only one group in the project; iii) the project was designed for beginners; iv) the date to enroll the experience.

Our first challenge has appeared on the early days of project. There were some learners' lefts from the groups due to the fact of learners being added at the same time into three different groups without previous notification. This point caught our attention and we have decided, in the following experience, to add the participants gradually to each group during the period of ambience as long as they know each group and their purposes.

The second step taken was when the ambience period began, which was the moment for learners to identify the main purposes of each group and learn how the experience would work because both learners and teachers had to be aware of which learning environment they were taking part, and it have required an adaptation as defended by Oliveira *et al* (2014). This first moment was primordial to call our attention to the validation of our materials designing, which was already created, however they were not tested (some pictures were too big, some video did not play on specific cell phone system etc). Since that, we had to reflect about the following questions to design the pedagogical materials: are they appropriate to be displayed on cell phones?; do they take small storage device?; do they consume too much mobile data to be loaded on the learners' devices?; Are the materials clear and easy to understand?. Answering these questions, it is possible to create meaningful materials.

As pointed out by Machado Spencer (2014), Lopes and Vas (2016), Santos, Coelho and Cabral (2016) there were financial and technical limitations expected as learners who do not have access to Internet all the time and those who did not have a large storage device to download higher files. We observed that images cannot have too much information, and the videos cannot be long. As it can be noticed, these are important aspects to be analyzed before sending the materials to the participants.



On the other side, by observing learners' performance in the activities, we have visualized some consequences of mobile learning. We noticed a spontaneous interaction among the learners, even though the activity was only to introduce themselves, they have gone beyond, and shared more information about themselves. This action also shows how learners have felt comfortable to bring their identities and to interact with other learners and teacher which is defended by Oliveira et al (2014) as an advantage of WhatsApp groups.

On the Doubts Group, we have observed others characteristics of mobile learning: flexibility and autonomy which confirms what Oliveira et al (2014) stated. We have noticed that our participants could do the activities proposed on the group in different places and situations, like at home, in a hospital and even in a ship, fostering their autonomy. They asked questions, shared links and created learning materials for them. These facts also showed an excellent example of how the mobile learning does not have limits of time or geographical space (BOTTENTUIT JUNIOR AND COUTINHO, 2016).

A challenge that caught our attention was the number of learners who left our groups (20 participants) during the whole experience. All dropouts were contacted and we have sent them text messages with some questions to understand the reasons. All of them answered that they really liked the project; nevertheless they did not have enough time to participate. This argument should be evaluated, since the perspective of mobile learning provides them a flexible schedule.

## **5. Final Considerations and proposals**

There are some presuppositions that we have to consider in order to improve our experience and to achieve our main goal which is to promote language learning on the Whatsapp.

The first point is that we must be alert to real reasons why some learners have quit. There are some assumptions about this fact: i) some participants may have entered the project only for curiosity; ii) the learners' resistance to the mobile learning, and iii) the quitting learners did not adapt to an informal learning environment. These last two reasons may be understood according to what Marc Prensky (2001) states considering digital immigrants who are not familiar to a virtual learning community. In addition, Bottentuit Junior and Albuquerque (2016) point out the teacher's resistance at using Apps in education, which lead us to infer that learners may also have some resistance.

However, these are just hypotheses and we still need to research further about how to avoid so many withdrawals as the ones we have faced. At the same time, we expect that this

experience contribute for other teachers and researchers interested in using WhatsApp for Language Learning. Prensky( 2001, p.1) calls our attention to the importance of innovating our ways of teaching and learning by saying: “our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.”

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