Enhancing Idiomatic Competence through WhatsApp: A Comparative Study of Mobile and Traditional Teaching Methods

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menguji efektivitas penggunaan WhatsApp sebagai alat untuk mengajarkan ekspresi idiomatik bahasa Inggris kepada mahasiswa EAP tingkat pra-menengah di Jurusan Non-Inggris di Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik. Dari 250 siswa, 64 peserta dipilih berdasarkan kemampuan bahasa Inggris mereka menggunakan Nelson Quick Check Placement Test dan dibagi menjadi kelompok eksperimen dan kelompok kontrol. Kelompok eksperimen menerima pelajaran dan latihan idiom melalui grup WhatsApp yang disebut Idiom Learning Group. Mereka mempraktikkan 60 idiom di luar kelas, berinteraksi dengan peneliti, dan dapat melakukan panggilan video WhatsApp untuk klarifikasi tambahan. Sebaliknya, kelompok kontrol menerima pelajaran yang sama melalui instruksi tatap muka tradisional. Penelitian ini dilakukan selama sembilan sesi. Dua sesi pertama melibatkan pemberian tes penempatan dan pretest tentang kompetensi idiomatik. Fase perlakuan meliputi enam sesi, di mana kelompok eksperimen menggunakan WhatsApp untuk instruksi dan latihan, sementara kelompok kontrol terlibat dalam pembelajaran di dalam kelas. Pada sesi akhir, kedua kelompok mengikuti post-test untuk mengukur peningkatan kompetensi idiomatik mereka. Analisis data menggunakan sampel berpasangan dan uji-t sampel independen menunjukkan perbedaan yang signifikan dalam skor post-test antara kedua kelompok, dengan kelompok eksperimen secara signifikan mengungguli kelompok kontrol (p < .05). Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pengajaran idiom melalui teknologi seluler, khususnya WhatsApp, meningkatkan kompetensi idiomatik secara lebih efektif daripada metode tradisional. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa mengintegrasikan teknologi seluler ke dalam pengajaran bahasa dapat memberikan kesempatan yang fleksibel, interaktif, dan menarik bagi para pelajar untuk berlatih bahasa, yang pada akhirnya dapat meningkatkan hasil belajar mereka.

Kata kunci: aplikasi seluler; pengajaran idiom, whatsapp.

Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of using WhatsApp as a tool for teaching English idiomatic expressions to pre-intermediate EAP students in the Non-English Department at the University of Muhammadiyah Gresik. From a pool of 250 students, 64 participants were selected based on their English proficiency using the Nelson Quick Check Placement Test and divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received idiom lessons and exercises through a WhatsApp group called Idiom Learning Group. They practiced 60 idioms outside the classroom, interacted with the researcher, and could make WhatsApp video calls for additional

clarification. In contrast, the control group received the same lessons through traditional face-to-face instruction. The study was conducted over nine sessions. The first two sessions involved administering the placement test and a pre-test on idiomatic competence. The treatment phase spanned six sessions, during which the experimental group used WhatsApp for instruction and practice while the control group engaged in in-class learning. In the final session, both groups took a post-test to measure their improvement in idiomatic competence. Data analysis using paired samples and independent samples t-tests revealed a significant difference in post-test scores between the two groups, with the experimental group significantly outperforming the control group ($p < .05$). The findings demonstrate that teaching idioms through mobile technology, specifically WhatsApp, enhances idiomatic competence more effectively than traditional methods. This suggests that integrating mobile technology into language teaching can provide learners with flexible, interactive, and engaging opportunities for language practice, ultimately improving their learning outcomes.

Key words: mobile applications; teaching idioms, whatsapp.

Introduction

Many second language educators believe that the indispensable role of English idiom learning in language learning for all four skills is crucial (Taylor, 2005). This belief is in line with a common belief that vocabulary words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions are at the heart of all language usage in the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Cowie et al., 1983; Laflin, 1996; Boers, 2008; Ambrose, 2008). McCarthy (1990) also supports this, asserting that one needs to know a wide range of words and idioms to express broader meanings. Therefore, it is evident that knowing vocabulary items, including idiomatic expressions, is one of the most important factors for learning a new language. Moreover, having a wide variety of vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions is core to improving learners' language competence, as highlighted by Yule (2006), who asserts that learning English idiomatic expressions enhances second or foreign language skills, helping non-native speakers better understand the target language. Ghazal (2007) similarly asserts that vocabulary acquisition, including idiomatic expressions, plays a critical role in language proficiency, especially for developing fluency.

Maisa and Karunakaran (2013) emphasize that no language teacher can afford to ignore idioms if the goal is a natural use of the target language. Folse (2004) further underlines that vocabulary learning, including idiomatic expressions, is essential for acquiring a language. Wilkins (1974) famously stated that while very little can be conveyed without grammar, nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary. Hatch (1983) also points out that basic communicative competence depends heavily on learners' ability to acquire vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions, which are crucial for understanding written texts and handling verbal communication effectively.

The significance of idiomatic expressions in communication is reinforced by Cooper (1999), who notes that idioms play a pivotal role in foreign language learning and mark native-like speech. Krashen (1989) also highlights that second language

learners often prioritize vocabulary and idioms, understanding their importance for mastering a second language. By mastering idiomatic expressions, students gain insights into metaphorical and lexical meanings beyond basic word levels, enhancing their cultural awareness and linguistic proficiency (Fromkin et al., 2003; Rizq, 2015).

Despite their importance, idioms are often challenging for learners due to their arbitrary and nonliteral nature (Hussein, Khanji, & Makhzoomy, 2011). Innovative teaching approaches, particularly those using technology, can help address these challenges. Warschauer and Healey (1998) note that computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has proven effective in English classrooms. In the era of mobile technology, applications like WhatsApp have transformed the language learning landscape by providing accessible, interactive, and collaborative learning opportunities (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Tai & Ting, 2011). WhatsApp, in particular, has gained prominence as a tool for fostering engagement, motivation, and collaborative learning (Han & Keskin, 2016; Yalcinalp & Gulbahar, 2010).

The research problem addressed in this study is framed as follows: "Does using WhatsApp have any significant effect on English idiom learning at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik?" Based on this question, the null hypothesis is formulated as:

H0: Using WhatsApp does not have any significant effect on English idiom learning at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik.

Theoretically, this study contributes to language teaching approaches by exploring the integration of social media applications, specifically WhatsApp, into English instruction. Practically, it provides English teachers with an alternative and productive technique for teaching idiomatic expressions through an accessible online platform. This aligns with the findings of Alsaleem (2014) and Jafari & Chalak (2016), who demonstrated the effectiveness of WhatsApp in enhancing vocabulary and idiom learning.

Recent studies highlight WhatsApp's potential to improve learners' engagement, motivation, and language skills (Alsaleem, 2013; Andújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017). WhatsApp's features—such as text messaging, voice notes, and multimedia sharing—make it a versatile tool for teaching and learning. By leveraging this application, educators can facilitate interactive and meaningful learning experiences, addressing the difficulties often associated with idiom acquisition. Saran et al (2012) further emphasizes the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning in idiom acquisition, highlighting its positive impact on learner engagement and vocabulary development.

Given the importance of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions in language proficiency and the growing role of mobile-assisted language learning, this study investigates whether WhatsApp can effectively teach English idioms to university students. The results offer insights into integrating technology in language instruction, contributing to theoretical advancements and practical applications in educational settings.

Method

This study employed an experimental quantitative design with a directional approach. Participants were selected using cluster sampling from intact classes, comprising 250 students enrolled in the Non-English Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik studying English for Academic Purposes. Out of this population, 64 participants were identified as having pre-intermediate English proficiency levels based on the Nelson Quick Check Placement Test (Fowler, 1987). All participants were native Indonesian speakers. The selected participants were randomly assigned to two equal groups: an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) of 32 students. The experimental group received English idiom instruction via WhatsApp, while the control group was taught using traditional face-to-face methods.

Instruments
1. Nelson Quick Check Placement Test (Fowler, 1987). This instrument ensured participant homogeneity by assessing their English proficiency levels. Students scoring between 30 and 47 out of 60 were classified as pre-intermediate.
2. Researcher-Developed English Idiom Pre-Test. A pre-test, developed based on *Essential Idioms in English* by Dixon, R. J. (2003), was used to assess participants' initial knowledge of English idioms. This multiple-choice test comprised 40 items. A panel of English experts confirmed its validity, and its reliability was established using the KR-21 formula (r=0.822). To ensure feasibility, the pre-test was piloted with a comparable group of students.
3. Researcher-Developed English Idiom Post-Test. The post-test, a modified version of the pre-test, was administered after the intervention. The order of questions and options was altered to minimize recall bias. The post-test was deemed reliable and valid as a slight modification of the validated pre-test.
4. Instructional Materials. A set of 60 English idioms, sourced from Dixon's book, was selected for instruction. Familiar idioms were excluded through preliminary assessment to ensure all target idioms were unknown or challenging for participants, as Dufon and Fong (1994) recommended.

Procedure

The study began by homogenizing the participants to ensure comparable levels of English proficiency. This was achieved using the Nelson Quick Check Placement Test, which categorized participants into pre-intermediate levels. Following this, all participants were administered an idiom pre-test to establish their baseline knowledge of idioms.

For the experimental group, students were instructed to install WhatsApp on their devices. A dedicated WhatsApp group was created, through which the researcher delivered lessons and exercises on idioms. Over six weeks, the group engaged in weekly sessions where 10 idioms were introduced and practiced. Each session lasted 30 minutes and included discussions, problem-solving, and sentence creation using the idioms. The researcher actively guided these interactions, fostering collaborative and interactive learning.

Meanwhile, the control group attended traditional face-to-face classroom sessions. These sessions mirrored the schedule of the experimental group, with 30-minute lessons held weekly over six weeks. The researcher introduced the idioms in these sessions, provided examples, and facilitated in-class exercises, including sentence construction and discussions.

After the instructional period, both groups were administered a post-test to measure their progress in idiom comprehension and usage. This allowed for a comparative analysis of the two instructional methods to evaluate the effectiveness of WhatsApp-based learning.

Results and Discussion

The data collected were analyzed according to the study's objective, using Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test to check for normality, and statistical tools including paired samples t-test and independent sample t-test to assess the effectiveness of WhatsApp instruction on the participants' English idiom learning.

64 English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students were drawn from a larger pool and divided into two groups: the Experimental Group (EG) and the Control Group (CG), based on their placement test scores. The homogeneity of the two groups regarding idiomatic competence was assessed through an independent-sample t-test on their pre-test scores.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	EG	32	14.7500	.98319
	CG	32	14.3438	1.53535

The EG learners' mean score on the pre-test was 14.7500, while the CG learners' mean score was 14.3438. An independent-sample t-test was conducted to examine if this difference was statistically significant.

Table 2. Results of Independent-Samples T-Test Comparing the Pretest Scores of EG and CG

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test Equality of Means
F	Sig.
1.633	.211

The results showed no significant difference between the pre-test scores of the two groups (t(62) = .891, p = .380), indicating homogeneity between the groups at the start of the study. The study aimed to determine whether WhatsApp instruction had a significant effect on English idiomatic competence. The EG and CG post-test scores were compared using a one-way ANCOVA to control for pre-existing differences.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Comparing the Post-test Scores of EG and CG Learners

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
EG	17.6875	1.53704	32
CG	15.5313	1.48850	32
Total	16.6094	1.84799	64

The EG group had a higher mean score (17.6875) than the CG group (15.5313). A one-way ANCOVA was conducted to assess if this difference was statistically significant.

Table 4. Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing the Post-test Scores of EG and CG Learners

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	37.367[a]	2	18.638	7.910	.002	.353
Intercept	71.318	1	71.318	30.193	.000	.510
Pretest	.171	1	.171	.072	.790	.002
Groups	37.040	1	37.040	15.681	.000	.351
Error	68.501	62	2.363			
Total	8933.750	64				
Corrected Total	105.867	63				

The ANCOVA results show that the difference between the EG and CG post-test scores was statistically significant (p = .000), suggesting that WhatsApp instruction significantly improved idiomatic competence. The effect size (partial eta squared = .351) indicates that WhatsApp instruction accounted for 35% of the difference between the two groups.

This study sought to answer the question: "Does using WhatsApp instruction have any significant effect on EAP students' English idiom learning?" The null hypothesis, stating that WhatsApp instruction does not have a significant effect on idiom learning, was rejected based on the results. The findings demonstrated a significant difference in post-test scores between the experimental group (EG), who received WhatsApp instruction, and the control group (CG), who received traditional instruction. Thus, the use of WhatsApp in learning English idioms proved to be an effective method, leading to more significant improvements in idiomatic competence among students.

The data analysis, including the Paired Samples t-test and Independent Samples t-test, indicated that students in the EG outperformed those in the CG (p < .05). This confirms that WhatsApp instruction was more effective than traditional methods. WhatsApp instruction provided students with more comprehensible and authentic inputs, facilitating better learning of idiomatic expressions. The use of technology, in this case, WhatsApp, enhanced students' motivation, self-confidence, and participation and led to greater mastery of idiomatic expressions.

These findings align with McGrath's (1998) assertion that technology can create more learner-centered, interactive, and engaging learning environments. Additionally, Nowaczyk (1998) highlights that technology is particularly beneficial for low achievers by encouraging independent learning. In this study, WhatsApp allowed for more frequent and flexible interactions between students, enhancing their learning of idioms beyond the classroom.

Furthermore, WhatsApp was an effective communication tool, enabling seamless interaction between the researcher and the students. The platform allowed teachers to stay in touch with students outside the classroom, reminding them of assignments or contacting those who missed class. This aspect supports Beauvis (1998), who suggests that shifting from a teacher-dominated classroom to a more independent learning environment enhances both the quantity and quality of learning. While this study focused on idiomatic competence, the benefits of WhatsApp instruction likely extend to other language skills and sub-skills. WhatsApp instruction offers a powerful tool for enhancing EAP students' language learning, particularly in the area of idiomatic competence. These findings highlight the potential benefits of incorporating mobile learning technologies into language education and suggest that further research could explore the broader applications of such technologies in other areas of language acquisition (Godwin-Jones, 2016; & Thorne et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of WhatsApp instruction on EAP students' English idiom learning. The results indicated that WhatsApp instruction significantly improved students' idiomatic competence compared to traditional instructional methods. The data analysis, including paired samples t-test, independent samples t-test, and ANCOVA, revealed that students in the experimental group (EG), who received WhatsApp-based instruction, performed better on the post-test than those in the control group (CG), who received traditional instruction.

The findings suggest that WhatsApp can be an effective tool for language learning, particularly in enhancing idiomatic competence. The use of WhatsApp provided students with more accessible, authentic, and engaging learning opportunities, allowing them to interact with the content, their peers, and the instructor outside of class time. This flexibility and interactivity increased the students' motivation, participation, and self-confidence.

Furthermore, WhatsApp instruction aligns with the concept of learner-centered education, where technology plays a pivotal role in fostering independent learning and facilitating continuous communication between students and instructors. The study demonstrates that mobile learning platforms like WhatsApp have the potential to create more dynamic and interactive learning environments, extending learning opportunities beyond the traditional classroom setting.

In conclusion, WhatsApp's positive impact on EAP students' idiomatic competence supports the integration of mobile technology into language teaching. The findings encourage further exploration of WhatsApp and other mobile platforms as valuable tools for enhancing language learning and expanding instructional methods. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of WhatsApp instruction across

various language skills and in different educational contexts to determine its broader potential in language education.

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