Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level

Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate

==

Abstract

Reading and writing are the two language skills on which most exams are based in order to assess the learners' command over the English language. However, it has been observed that the syllabus prescribed at college level does not provide enough scope for the learners to practise these skills in the classroom. Learners from the regional medium find it very difficult to master these skills. This raises their anxiety level them and reduces their motivation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop alternative teaching and learning strategies that can help the regional medium background learners work on their reading and writing skills in the target language, English. In such a scenario, social media such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter can be used to help the learners develop their skills as these social networking sites are very popular and can further motivate these learners to improve their reading and writing skills. The present study aims at identifying whether the use of social networking sites or applications can help motivate undergraduate college level L2 learners of English to use their reading and writing skills thus enhancing them (their skills) with reduced anxiety.

Key words: *Whatsapp*, Reading and Writing Skills, Undergraduate College Level

Introduction

Reading and writing are the two language skills on which most exams are based in order to assess the learners' command over the English language. However, it has been observed that the syllabus prescribed at college level does not provide sufficient scope for the learners to practise the skills in the class. Learners who have done their 12 years of schooling from a regional medium of instruction with very little exposure to English find it almost impossible to cope with the linguistic challenges they come across in an English medium college. Moreover,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   47

they are required to master the two skills apart from listening and speaking skills even in the job market which is the main goal behind teaching them the language at school and college levels. As a result, this difficult position leads to anxiety in the learners as they find themselves inadequately equipped and discourages them from using the skills that they possess which further reduces the chances of any improvement that the learner can achieve. Since anxiety, as Horwitz et al. (1986) state, can have a strong influence of foreign language learning, it is essential that the teacher implements suitable teaching strategies in order to eradicate the hindrance and help the learners learn and use the target language proficiently. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop teaching and learning strategies that can help the regional medium background learners work on their reading and writing skills in the target language.

In such a scenario, the most important factor that can help these learners improve their language skills is motivation. Motivation is deemed as the key factor that decides how a language learner performs any of the (language) skills (Hohn, 1995). He states, "The motivational state of learners determines not only what is learnt, but how much effort is likely to be expended in acquiring new learning" (p 274). Motivation, as we know, can bring out the best in anybody and help them improve what they do. Hence, effective tools of motivation are required to be implemented so that learners feel the need to put into use the skills that they already possess.

Communication through Social Media

One of the most interesting pastimes for people of all ages today and more common among college students is communication through social media such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. It was observed that people prefer these ways of communicating to a face to face conversation due to various reasons. College students are found busy silently chatting on their phones with people not around them instead of those who are available unlike in the past when students would start talking and making noise as soon as the class time finished. Though the extensive use of social media can be seen as an activity that can affect the users' social skills, the learners' tendency to use social media may be utilized to strengthen their reading and writing skills.

Focus of This Study

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   48

The study aims at identifying whether the use of social networking sites or applications, WhatsApp in particular, can help motivate undergraduate college level L2 (slow) learners of English to use their reading and writing skills thus enhancing them (their skills) with reduced anxiety.

Need for the Study

The study was conducted in an undergraduate college in Oman where students come with 12 years of Arabic medium school education with minimal knowledge of English and sometimes absolutely no comprehension of English. They are given admission in English medium government colleges after a placement test where everybody is placed at some level in some class. Due to the demand for English in the job market students are forced to study in these colleges which is actually a great help from the government towards the students. However, there is very little scope for linguistic improvement in the little time that these students have at this level. As a result, there is not much difference between their written English that they produce at their Foundation levels (the entry level) and what they do in their final year of college (the fifth or sixth year). Therefore it was necessary to identify effective strategies in order to offer them a wider scope to practise and improve their reading and writing skills in the limited time.

The Study

The study was conducted using a simple questionnaire to identify the most popular social media/ application among the students, and by utilizing it to maximize reading and writing opportunities for them in a way that minimized their L2 anxiety and improved their attitude towards learning English.

Freedom to Use Mobile Phones in Class

Studies show that students learn best when they are happy. One thing that keeps all the students happy and occupied most of their free time is their mobile phones. Therefore they were permitted to use them during the class for learning purposes only, in that, they could look up the dictionary on their phones since it was easier and quicker than opening the paper dictionaries.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   49

According to Berns (1990 cited in Savignon, 2002 p 6),

"Language teaching is based on a view of language as communication. That is, language is seen as a social tool that speakers use to make meaning; speakers communicate about something to someone for some purpose, either orally or in writing."

It was observed that students used social media such as **Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, SMS**, and others, but only in Arabic. This was due to various problems they faced with English such as, in framing grammatically correct sentences; finding the right expressions quickly; inadequate vocabulary, and the fear of committing errors. They occasionally wrote emails to their teachers since it was mandatory for the students and the teachers to communicate with each other about their project work or any other important messages. These emails served as an opportunity to practise writing, but they contained very little content. It was also noticed that most students enjoyed reading Arabic, but were not very keen on writing in it because they found it difficult as well because Classical or Modern Standard Arabic (which is used for writing) is much tougher than the various regional dialects (Altoma,1969). However, when it came to English, they avoided both the skills - reading and writing - because of the reasons mentioned above.

Hence, it was essential to identify ways of motivating them to communicate in English through writing. With the help of a questionnaire it was found out that WhatsApp was the most popular application students used to chat with one another. Therefore, it was used as the tool to motivate learners to write and read English.

The Method

The teacher formed a group with the girls in the class and another with the boys to communicate with them within specific time limits. There were rules set about what could or could not be used in the group chat, such as, they could use only English, the teacher would respond only if she received a message before a certain time in the evening, they could not share the teacher's number with anyone outside the class, etc. (Since the students are generally very well-mannered and respectful towards the teachers, they did not have to be told not use profanity.)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   50

WhatsApp was used to send written work assigned to them. They were excited about it and sent their paragraphs and sentences based on what was done in class each day.

WhatsApp was also used to applaud or appreciate each student's work and participation and positive attitude or good behaviour in class. This worked as a great source of motivation to those who made an attempt to do the above as well as others who wanted to be appreciated before others in the group.

Use of WhatsApp with the teacher gave the learners more opportunities to write in English paying a lot of attention to vocabulary, spelling and grammar as far as they could. They also used impressive expressions from the internet which encouraged the others to use interesting terms as well. Thus they were involved in more meaningful communication through writing. In this way group learning even outside the classroom was made possible through WhatsApp. The teacher ensured that she never used or allowed them to use any typical 'text speak' (short expressions people use on WhatsApp) or short forms of words while communicating with the students though it was sometimes inconvenient to write long messages in response to theirs. It gave them more exposure to useful vocabulary and grammatically correct sentences which they learnt through this meaningful activity.

WhatsApp also proved useful for the teacher when she needed to change the classroom or wanted to assign some language task to be done before she could start the class. At the same time, students were comfortable informing the teacher when it was not convenient for them to attend classes without having to make a call.

Students shared pictures of theirs with their friends and explained where the pictures were taken, who were in the pictures, etc. They also discussed in writing the pictures they shared of the black clouds just before it rained, of the rain, and of the wadis (canals) that overflowed due to the rain which is always an exciting topic of discussion for people in Oman.

There were instances when students who hardly spoke to the teacher in the class joked in English with the teacher on WhatsApp which showed that the strategy was successful because the students were not inhibited by the language and the learning conditions anymore. They were just communicating to have fun which is one of the most common functions of a language that

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   51

we are comfortable using (Fillmore, 1979). Accuracy was not the aim of the strategy here. The main focus was on their fluency which forms an essential part of Communicative Language Teaching. Use of WhatsApp for the above mentioned tasks proved to be useful for the learners' language development which helped achieve the aim of fluency for most students.

The Mother Tongue of the Learners in the Learning and Teaching Materials

The students were given short articles from Arabic newspapers selected at random and were asked to translate them so that the teacher would be aware of the current issues in Oman. They were asked to finish it the same evening and send it to the teacher on WhatsApp groups. This helped them to comment on each other's work through discussions on WhatsApp. It was possible to enable them to do more practice in writing because the teacher asked them questions in order to understand the translated content. This activity aroused interest in the learners because they felt that they were sharing information about their country and culture with a non-Omani teacher. Focus on meaning always helps the learner to use language without inhibitions. "By encouraging learners to ask for information, to seek information, to use circumlocution, … to negotiate meaning, to stick to the communicative task at hand, teachers", states Savignon (2002), invariably encouraged learners to take risks and to venture beyond memorized patterns by using the target language creatively.

Involving the Culture of the Learners in the Learning and Teaching Materials

According to Taylor and Sobel (2011), an effective approach includes cultural relevance to the learners. They advocate teaching in a manner that shows the students that 'their lives matter to their teacher' (p20). Hence, it was important to involve the learners' first language, their culture, their views and opinions, their choices, their comfort and convenience in the entire process of building up the teaching strategies and designing the materials.

Therefore, pictures of various social gatherings and celebrations in Oman, Omani food, the differences among the clothing worn in different regions in Oman, differences between

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   52

clothing worn by men and women in Oman, importance given to the elders in Omani families, reasons why Omanis still go to the traditional suqs/markets though they have international hypermarkets and malls, how students can develop their country, the history of Oman, etc. were posted by the teacher on WhatsApp. The students were instructed to find information from any reliable source such as books in the library, magazines, the internet, other textbooks, and to acknowledge the sources while including information from them. This gave them practice of referencing information.

The pictures were also used to hold discussions in the class after which they would get into groups, jot down the points discussed, and write a passage of 100 to 150 words individually. This activity helped them practice writing short paragraphs in English.

In addition, the pictures were used to do some brain-storming as a class, take down the important points, make a plan together in groups of four, make an outline of the essay and write the essay as a group in which one person would do the writing, but everyone's ideas were included. They would make all possible corrections before exchanging their work with another group who would then read it together and make necessary corrections (some of which they would need to verify with the teacher). These essays were exchanged among girls and boys which made them check as thoroughly as they could before passing their work to the other group to avoid embarrassment. After they checked each other's work, the essays were handed to the teacher who would check them again and write and/or verbally give them the feedback. All these tasks helped them write essays with references.

Familiarity with the Students' Background

Familiarity with the background and personal problems of the students and an observable attempt by the teacher to know the students better can help them feel cared for. It is also essential to enable the teacher to create a good rapport with the students. Therefore, steps were taken by the teacher in order to know as much as possible about each learner. For example, the teacher had informal conversations with each student individually (not in the group) on WhatsApp in order to become familiar with each student's family background and personal problems, and problems they faced in and outside the classroom if any. Frequent inquiries regarding their family, health, food, transport, and other important things that they shared with the teacher

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   53

helped reinforce the bonding between the students and the language teacher which is highly essential for successful learning of a foreign language. If the teacher as well as the language that he/she teaches are alien to them, learning will not take place unless the students are extremely self-motivated. Hence, consistent communication and a good rapport between the learners and the teacher created a bonding which led to the elimination of any fear of committing errors before the teacher. It also allowed more and unrestricted language use and encouraged the learners to approach the teacher for any help with their writing tasks as well.

It has been observed in the study that the learners do not fear committing errors in their L2 when the teacher does not always focus on accuracy, but on the message that is being conveyed. All along the use of WhatsApp as a learning and teaching strategy, the teacher focused on the positive points of the students' work avoiding pointing out errors. Errors were dealt with in the classroom as part of the usual lessons. However, errors that were very common and frequent in some learners' written English used on WhatsApp even after a general discussion and practice in the classroom were discussed after class hours personally. But this was done sparingly and was accompanied with profuse appreciation of all the positive points in their language performance so as to prevent the learners from feeling demotivated by their weak points which could have raised their anxiety levels again.

Another factor used in the study which helps the slow learners participate in classroom activities is the use of colour and music. Therefore, the teacher sent interesting music videos followed by gap fill exercises, comprehension questions, summarizing (the songs), etc. on WhatsApp to the students. All the students watched the videos with a lot of interest and did all the tasks which they said was fun and asked for more or such songs and activities. This proved to be useful in improving the students' vocabulary, grammar, listening skills, writing skills and reading skills. It also developed in them a liking for English music which is another authentic source of exposure to the language and the culture.

Humour, as Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) rightly advocate, is a crucial element of successful language learning. There are many ways of bringing in humour in the language class through WhatsApp such as, using texts that are funny, sharing jokes that students can understand and enjoy, using funny videos to teach language, playing comical audio for listening and writing

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   54

tasks, encouraging students to complete jokes, using humourous topics in writing tasks or debates, joking about students who do not mind it, joking about one's self, sharing hilarious anecdotes and encouraging students to share theirs, etc. All of these were included in the study and proved to keep the students involved in language enhancement without any anxiety.

Appreciation of the students' efforts on WhatsApp improved their attitude towards writing in English. They kept trying to do better each time to get more appreciation as it enhanced their self-image. Acknowledgment of good work was offered by posting their pictures and writing words of praise to which all the students added. All the students were applauded for various achievements which boosted their morale and kept them motivated to improve their English. Referring to some students' work as good examples was highly encouraging not only to the students who were being appreciated, but also to the others who wanted to receive the same kind of appreciation and acknowledgement.

Students are found to be very enthusiastic when linguistic scaffolding is accompanied by creativity in teaching and learning. Creativity breaks the monotony of the language class providing the learners the impetus to try new things and new ways of using the language. This is essential because language is dynamic and can be used in unlimited ways outside the classroom and a simulation of the natural use of language inside the classroom can promote optimal use of L2 and improve all the language skills of the learners. Runco (2007) suggests that activities that are created in a game-like fashion release creativity involving learner-centered, interaction-based and open-ended elements which are ideally suited to accommodate creative learner thinking and behavior. Creative activities and games in the language classroom get the learners fully involved in language learning usually unconsciously. Therefore, language based quizzes with time limits such as, grammar and vocabulary based multiple choice questions at the end of a lesson in the class and also after class hours in order to check comprehension proved to be effective in encouraging them to pay more attention in the class and perform better. After class hours students summarized the anecdotes that had been discussed in class. They competed with each other to present the best summary by using as many target words mentioned in the textbook as well as others. Thus the activity brought out the best in each student which was applauded.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   55

It is observed that students feel closer to the teacher when he/she communicates with them outside the classroom as well. This way the teacher gets the opportunity to know the students and the problems they face in and outside the classroom which prevent them from performing well in the class. This knowledge helps the teacher address the learner needs more effectively. Close communication between the students and the teacher is essential because many a time students are not comfortable communicating their problems to the teacher as they share a very formal relationship and fear that he/she might not understand their predicament. Besides building a good rapport with the teacher, which most students would like communication outside the classroom serves as a source of practice of the language. Learners are also exposed to a lot of language that the teacher may not be able to teach in the classroom due to time constraints. Above all, this type of communication is meaningful to the learners and, therefore, leads to more motivated language learning. As Oxford (1991) proposes, communicative competence can be developed through realistic interaction using meaningful and contextualized language.

As a result of the above strategies, while the learners are enthusiastic about participating in all the activities in the language class, the teacher in turn is motivated to come up with more stimulating ways of teaching because he/she can see that the strategies are working for the learners.

Results and Discussion

- It is identified that implementation of suitable teaching strategies and materials which involve the students' interests and capabilities help motivate the learners to improve their writing skills though it is considered the most difficult of the four language skills. Channelizing their interests and making the most out of their favourite pastime which is the use of social networking sites such as WhatsApp and the use of technology as a learning tool may help students enjoy learning writing in L2.

- Learners respond better when technology, especially the internet, is involved in their language learning. The internet which is available on the mobile phones of almost all the students is a highly motivating tool for L2 learning. Many applications on the mobile phone serve as language learning resources such as, WhatsApp, mobile dictionary, Google Translate, Google, Google Scholar, emails, bookzza.org, Facebook, etc.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   56

- Providing students with opportunities to share their culture with the teacher has helped the students a lot in communicating in L2 without any inhibitions because they take pride in their culture and are so eager to make it known to people from other cultural backgrounds, especially their teachers, that they do not worry about committing errors while communicating in English. As a result, the students are engaged in meaningful, natural and anxiety-free communication in L2.

- The teacher also needs to take teaching and learning outside the classroom where real communication actually takes place. He/she may use other channels of communication such as emails and apps on the mobile phone such as WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., which the learners enjoy using. However, the teacher needs to use them with discretion.

- It has been noticed that creating humour in every class relaxes the students' minds and helps them enjoy language learning.

- Profuse encouragement and appreciation of good work or even the slightest improvement can be extremely helpful for slow learners to do better.

- Respect for the students' culture and traditions should be exhibited in as many ways as possible because it shows that we respect them for who they are and that we do not look down on them for any reason (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In turn students tend to respect the teacher and what he/she is trying to help them achieve. It encourages them to put in maximum effort to perform better each time.

- The learners' attitude towards writing in L2 improves to a large extent when the teacher changes his/her approach according to their language needs. As Weimer (2002) rightly states, learner-centred teaching involves significant changes. For instance, the teacher needs to look at what the learner needs from the syllabus and for what purpose, and then tailor the materials accordingly. The study showed that when learners are offered content that they enjoy, they also enjoy writing about them.

- A personal rapport with each student is highly recommended in order to know them better and to cater to their language needs as well as any personal issues that the teacher can help with. Students develop a positive attitude towards language learning when they share a healthy relationship with the language teacher. It helps them realize that they are important to the teacher who they consider as the most important person in the classroom. This makes it possible for the students to develop a positive self- image which helps them

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   57

combat their inhibitions. It can also encourage them to approach the teacher for any help with the target language (Harmer, 1991).

Implications for Language Teachers

The study has shown that it is highly essential for language teachers to identify what their learners enjoy doing and utilize it to engage them in language development, especially reading and writing which slow learners find difficult when done in the conventional way. This requires quite a bit of change in the teaching style and strategies as well as a huge paradigm shift. The teacher needs to think in a different way, a way in which they may not be comfortable because change is not an easy thing to cope with and it is all the more difficult when there is a lot of age/generation gap between the learners and the teacher. However, this change can go a long way in enabling the learners to develop interest in reading and writing in the target language without any anxiety. WhatsApp has proved to be useful in achieving this goal. It helped stimulating the learners' writing fluency, strengthened their reading skills, improved their vocabulary, grammar and confidence in their language. A very important aspect besides any teaching learning tools that teachers create is a good rapport with the learners. Similarly, teachers may try out other applications using modern technology which learners enjoy in order to motivate them to practise and improve their language skills which they would otherwise find challenging.

===

References

Altoma, S. J. (1969). The problem of diglossia in Arabic. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Berns, M. (1990). Contexts of Competence: Sociocultural Considerations in Communicative Language Teaching. New York, NY: Plenum.

Dörnyei. Z., & Csizér, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: Results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, 2,3, 203-229. doi: 10.1177/136216889800200303

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   58

Fillmore, C. J. (1979) On Fluency. In Fillmore, C. J., Kempler, D., and Wang, W. S. J (Eds.) . *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behavior*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Harmer, J. (1991).The practice of English language teaching. London, NY: Longman Publications.

Hohn, R. L. (1995). Classroom learning and teaching. White Plains, NY. Longman Publications.

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern language journal*. 70.2: 125-132. Blackwell Publishing. http://www.jstor.org/stable/327317 .

Markus, H.R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and self: implications for cognition, emotion and motivation. *Psychological Review*. 98,2. 224-253. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224

Oxford, R. L. (1991). What every teacher should know. *Language learning*. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Runco, M. (2007). Creativity: Theories and themes. Research, development and practice. Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press.

Savignon, S. J. (2002). Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching Contexts and concerns in teacher education. S. J. Savignon (Ed.) . London, UK: Yale University Press.

Taylor, S.V., & Sobel, D.M. (2011). Culturally responsible pedagogy: teaching like our students' lives matter. Innovation and leadership in English language teaching. Volume 4. Emerald Books.

Weimer, M. (2002). Learner-centred teaching. Five key changes to practice. San Francisco,CA: Jossey-Bass.
===

Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Department of English

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   59

Osmania University
Hyderabad - 500007
Telangana
India
mariajustina76@yahoo.co.in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 16:11 November 2016**
Maria Justina, M.Phil., Ph.D. Candidate
Use of *Whatsapp* to Enhance Reading and Writing Skills at Undergraduate College Level   60