Artículos

Improving oral communication skills of English learners with voice messages and short videos

Mejora de las habilidades comunicativas orales de estudiantes de inglés con mensajes de voz y vídeos cortos

RTE
Revista Tecnológica
ESPOL

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Abstract: University students face the challenge of communicating in a foreign language while speaking. This is perceived as one of the most complex skills to develop. The lack of opportunities to interact in the target language, in and out of the English classrooms, prevents students from acquiring fluency and confidence. This study examines the development of students' oral communication skills of Level B1 (Pre-Intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) using the WhatsApp applications. Forty–five EFL learners aged 18-25 from a language center at a university in Ecuador performed exercises using voice messages and short videos as part of their course planned activities. The data collection method consisted of surveys and interviews with the participants and their teacher's observations. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation accordingly. Analysis of the data evidenced that short videos were far more effective than voice messaging in improving the participants' oral communication skills. Other benefits were the improvement of grammar and pronunciation observed in the learners' voice messages, with the consequent improvement of their speaking fluency. It can be said that the participants' overall oral communication skills developed with the use of the WhatsApp application in this study. Therefore, the authors recommend exploring the application of technological resources in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: educational research, foreign language instruction, English, educational technology, educational innovations, WhatsApp.

Resumen: Los estudiantes universitarios enfrentan el desafío de comunicarse en una lengua extranjera mientras que la

destreza oral es una de las más difíciles de desarrollar. La falta de oportunidades para interactuar en el lenguaje objetivo dentro y fuera de la clase de inglés impide adquirir fluidez y confianza. Este estudio examina el desarrollo de las habilidades de comunicación oral de los estudiantes del Nivel B1 (Nivel pre-intermedio del Marco Común Europea de Referencia de Lenguas) de inglés como Lengua Extranjera, haciendo uso de la aplicación WhatsApp. Cuarenta y cinco estudiantes de inglés, de edades entre 18 y 25 años, de un centro de idiomas de una universidad de Ecuador realizan ejercicios de comunicación oral empleando mensajes de voz, con la ejecución de vídeos cortos como parte de las actividades planificadas en su curso. El método de recolección de datos incluye encuestas y entrevistas a los participantes, y observaciones de su profesor. La información se examina mediante estadística descriptiva y tabulaciones cruzadas. El análisis de los datos evidencia que el uso de vídeos cortos es mucho más eficaz que los mensajes de voz para mejorar las habilidades comunicativas orales de los participantes. Otro beneficio es la mejora en el uso de la gramática y la pronunciación observada en los mensajes de voz de los estudiantes, y su consecuente mejoría de la fluidez en su habilidad oral. En este estudio puede decirse que las habilidades comunicativas orales mejoran de manera general con el uso de la aplicación WhatsApp, por lo tanto, los autores recomiendan explorar diferentes recursos tecnológicos en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: investigación educativa, enseñanza de lengua extranjera, inglés, tecnología educativa, innovaciones educativas, WhatssApp.

Introduction

This study addresses one of the concerns of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers about learners' difficulty speaking in English after studying the language for several years. English learners have many problems engaging in meaningful conversations. Most learners have difficulty developing oral communication skills (Altiner, 2018). This difficulty may result from some teachers focusing more on teaching grammar and vocabulary with a content-based approach, leaving a communication-based approach aside. Also, for some learners, passing an English exam composed of grammatical structures and writing about individual experiences is not enough to improve their oral communication skills. Not being able to speak English in and outside the classroom is a typical problem college students face. In addition, learners say they are shy or afraid to make mistakes when trying to communicate in English (Namaziandost, 2019).

It must also be said that oral production in the English language does not only help learners to further their education, but also prepares them for cross-cultural activities in their life experiences. Furthermore, speaking English will enable learners to obtain part-time jobs due to Ecuador being a touristic location for foreign English speakers who are seeking adventures and international relationships. Learners with a B1 level of English will find it easy to get jobs in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and tourist places. The advantages of cross-cultural activities like knowing Ecuadorians' local cuisines and other cultural identities may be transmitted to English native speakers who come to visit Ecuador for cultural experiences. Cultural experiences may be achieved through speaking to individuals physically or through video conferencing (Jung, 2013). Learners will be prepared to master the meanings of words and use them on different occasions with those who want to have a cultural understanding of a specific location (Kurkimbayeva et al., 2020).

According to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education on Learning English, Article 31 of the University Council, students must achieve a B1 level of English of the Common European Framework before graduating from university (CES, 2019). Some high school students need to prepare well to pass their English proficiency level when they reach university. The English proficiency level at the university corresponds to the B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which states that learners would be able to communicate fluently on topics related to their everyday activities (Council of Europe, 2001, p.24). This work results from research undertaken towards the master in TEFL degree of one of the authors. It is set in the English Center of the Continuous Education

Department at the National Polytechnic University. Participants are university and high school students enrolled in this English Center who are challenged to acquire a B1 level (a pre-intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) to improve their oral communication skills.

The research questions of this study are:

> 1. How do voice messages improve the oral communication of EFL B1 students using the WhatsApp application?
>
> 2. How do short videos in English improve the oral communication of EFL B1 students using the WhatsApp application?
>
> 3. What are EFL B1 learners' perceptions of using voice messages and short videos to enhance their communication skills?

Methodology

This study aimed to employ an action research approach to address communication skills problems in the EFL classroom. Alina et al. (2007) suggest that action research results in practical solutions to problems in education and learning. Siegel (2013) states that practical solutions can improve language skills when attention is given to the learner's perspective of their learning process. In the same vein, Tuan and Nhu (2010) claim that researchers and learners need to investigate student perspectives while interacting to find solutions to learners' communication skills in the classroom. Therefore, this study uses an interpretive approach to examine learners' perceptions of improvement when using WhatsApp as a learning tool. In this regard, the study combined a survey, interviews, and observations as data collection tools to identify and meet the needs of learners.

The survey employed in this study included five statements where the participants were asked to position themselves along a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, as follows:

> 1. Extremely poor
>
> 2. Poor
>
> 3. Neither poor nor good
>
> 4. Good

5. Extremely good

The semi-structured interview included three initial questions aimed to respond the research questions:

Question 1. Would you like to use voice messages through the WhatsApp application during class activities? Why?

Question 2. Would you like to use short videos from the WhatsApp application during class activities to enhance your communicative skills? Why?

Question 3. What are your perceptions about using voice messages and short videos to improve your speaking skills?

The data collected from surveys were interpreted using descriptive statistics and a cross-tabulation analysis. The responses to the open questions in the interviews were listed for their analysis. Results and conclusions followed the analysis of the collected data.

Forty-five participants took part in this study. Students were enrolled in the 5th Cycle English Course, Fall Term (October 20th to December 17th, 2020) in the English Center of a polytechnic university. All participants were 18 to 25 years old. They held Level B1 in English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Participants granted their informed consent to participate, knowing the purpose and the content of the survey and the interview. Participants attended two-hour daily English lessons for eight weeks, from Monday to Friday. Learners in this study usually have scarce opportunities to put the grammatical structure learned in class into practice in their daily activities and conversations. Therefore, this study explored the effect of using English voice messages and short videos through the WhatsApp application to improve the communication skills of EFL B1 learners in the classroom. The focus of this study was the improvement of oral skills, fluency, and the learners' confidence in the use of the language.

Results and Discussion

The participants' responses to the survey are presented based on a descriptive statistical analysis. Figure 1 illustrates how students perceived their improvement after using WhatsApp voice messages through bar charts. Most respondents (n=20; 44.4%) agreed that WhatsApp voice messages are an excellent tool to improve their communication skills. At the same time, only one participant (2.2%) agreed that the use of WhatsApp voice messages is a poor technique to improve communication skills.

The second objective of this study was to explore how short videos from WhatsApp contributed to participants' oral communicative

skills. Figure 2 reflects that most respondents (n=22;48.9%) agreed that short videos are good to improve their communicative skills. While only one of the respondents (2.2%) agreed that short videos are considered an Extremely Poor tool to improve communication skills.

The third objective of this study was to know the most perceived improvement after using voice messages and short videos from the WhatsApp application. Figure 3 depicts students' responses, with most respondents (n=18;40.0%) reporting the perception of improvement in their grammar skills. Only two respondents (4.4%) agreed that voice messages and short videos from the WhatsApp application enhance their emotional expression.
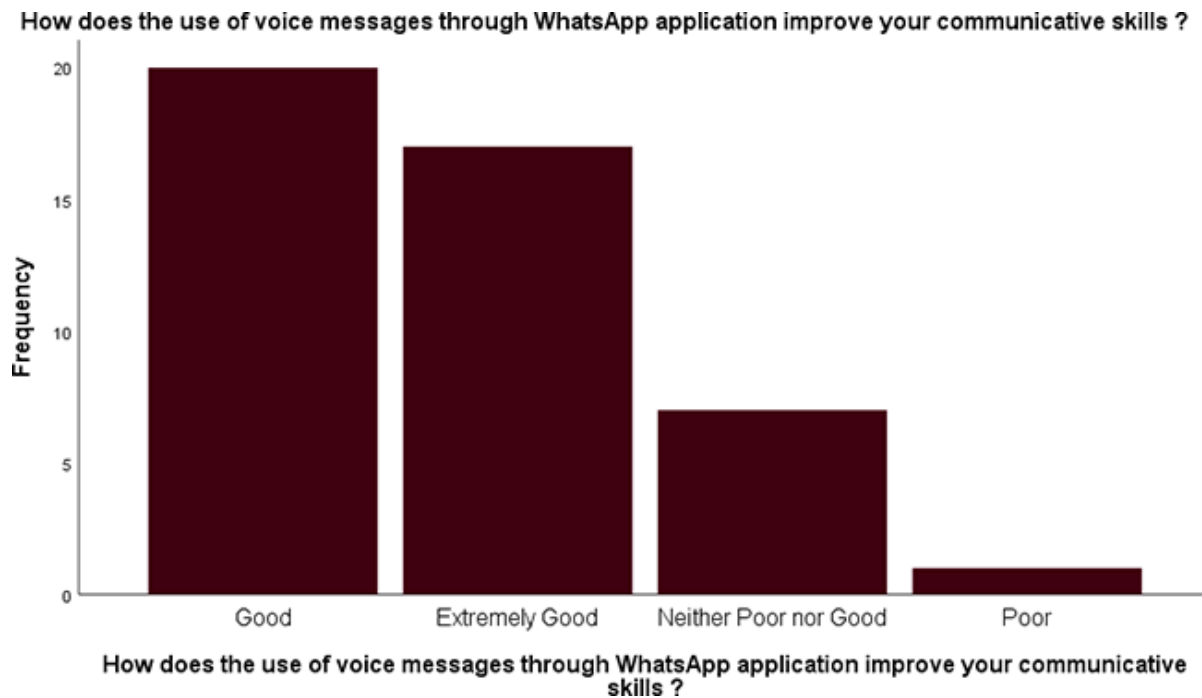
How does the use of voice messages through WhatsApp application improve your communicative skills ?

How does the use of voice messages through WhatsApp application improve your communicative skills ?

Figure 1

Bar chart of the distribution of students' perception of their improvement after the use of voice messages

How does the use of short videos in the English language through WhatsApp application enhance your communicative skills ?
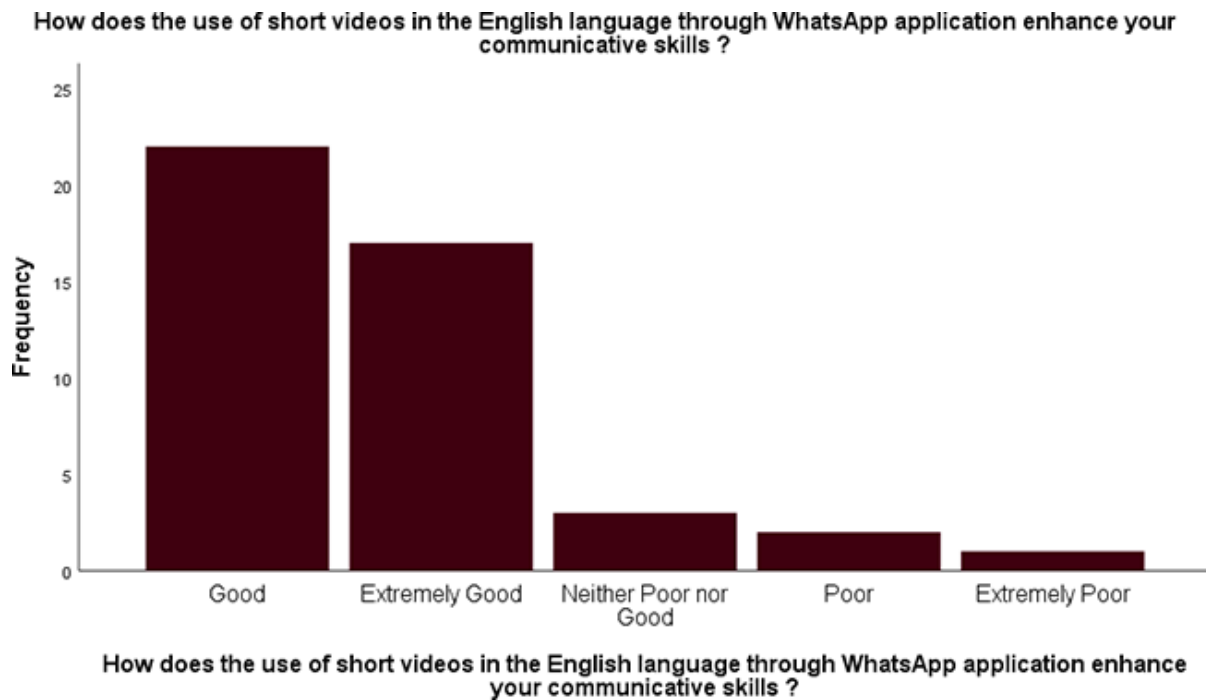
Figure 2

Bar chart of the distribution of students' perception of their improvement after the use of short videos

What are your perceptions of the uses of voice messages and short videos from WhatsApp application to enhance your communication skills?
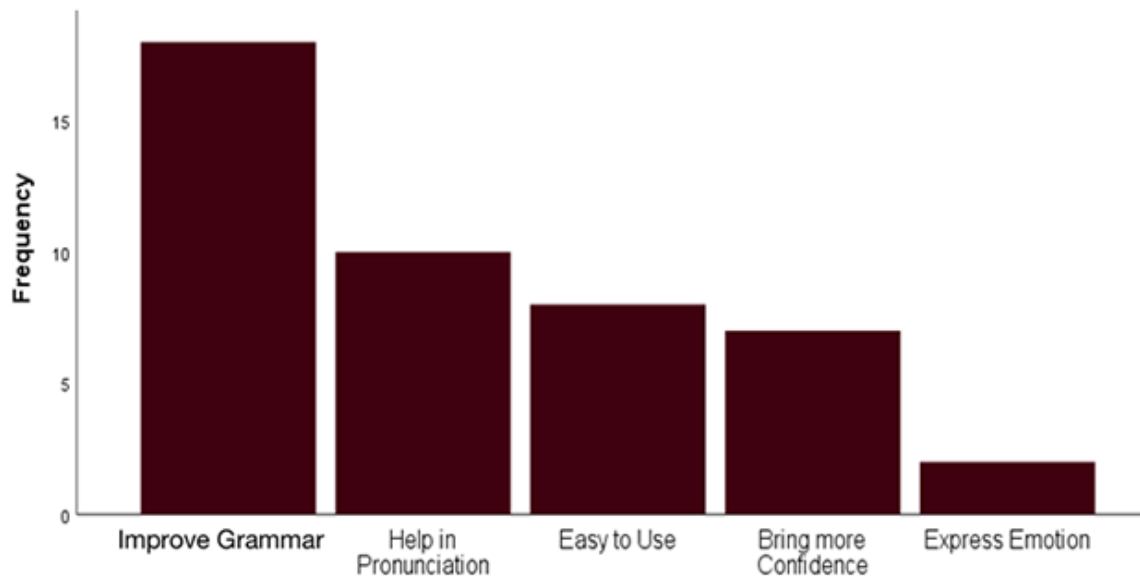

Figure 3

Bar chart of the distribution of students' perception of their improvement after the use of voice messages and short videos

A cross-tabulation count of students' perceptions corroborates that those respondents who agree that voice messages and short videos are good tools to enhance their communication skills relate Grammar as the primary area of improvement (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1

Cross-tabulation count of respondents' perceptions (voice messages)

SCALE	EASY TO USE	HELP IN PRONUNCIATION	MORE CONFIDENCE	EXPRESS EMOTION	IMPROVE GRAMMAR	TOTAL
EXTREMELY POOR	0	0	0	0	0	0
POOR	1	0	0	0	0	1
NEITHER POOR NOR GOOD	1	1	1	1	3	7
GOOD	3	5	5	1	6	20
EXTREMELY GOOD	3	4	1	0	9	17
TOTAL	8	10	7	2	18	45

Table 2

Cross-tabulation count of respondents' perceptions (short videos

SCALE	EASY TO USE	HELP IN PRONUNCIATION	MORE CONFIDENCE	EXPRESS EMOTION	IMPROVE GRAMMAR	TOTAL
EXTREMELY POOR	0	0	0	0	1	1
POOR	2	0	0	0	0	2
NEITHER POOR NOR GOOD	1	0	1	1	0	3
GOOD	4	4	6	0	8	22
EXTREMELY GOOD	1	6	0	1	9	17
TOTAL	8	10	7	2	18	45

The Pearson Chi-Square value was calculated to determine if there was a significant difference among the perceptions. It was found that there is no statistically significant association between the participant's perception of the use of voice message and short videos and their responses about the use of voice messages as a tool to improve communication skills. This lack of association is shown in Table 3 since the P-value of 0.551 is more significant than 0.05 (95% confidence level).

Table 3

Chi-Square test

	VALUE	DF	ASYMPTOTIC SIGNIFICANCE (2-SIDED)
PEARSON CHI-SQUARE	10.738a	12	.551
LIKELIHOOD RATIO	9.912	12	.624
LINEAR-BY-LINEAR ASSOCIATION	.505	1	.477
N OF VALID CASES	45		

a. 18 cells (90.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.

The same test was run with the second set of data. It was found that there is a statistically significant association between people's perception of the use of voice messages and short videos and their responses about the use of short videos as a tool to improve their communication skills. This association is seen in Table 4, where the P-value of 0.027 is less than 0.05 (95% confidence level).

Table 4

Chi-Square test

	VALUE	DF	ASYMPTOTIC SIGNIFICANCE (2-SIDED)
PEARSON CHI-SQUARE	28.519a	16	.027
LIKELIHOOD RATIO	28.285	16	.029
LINEAR-BY-LINEAR ASSOCIATION	1.599	1	.206
N OF VALID CASES	45		

a. 23 cells (92.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.

The semi-structured interview with each participant was thought to inquire if they liked introducing the WhatsApp application using voice messages and short videos during classroom activities to enhance their communicative skill. An opening question was followed by the second question to make participants state their reasons why they would like to use it and why not. The last question aimed to know their points of view on the uses of both voice messages and short videos through the WhatsApp application. Table 5 lists the responses from participants as follows:

Table 5

Responses to semi-structured interviews

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES (n=45)
Participants who would like the use of voice messages through WhatsApp during learning activities.	All participants said yes to this question.
Participants who would not like the use of voice messages through WhatsApp during learning activities.	None.
Participants' reasons for the use of voice messages.	-It makes it possible to be confident when talking. -It is possible to repeat sentences and delete them until accuracy is achieved because we can speak well. -It makes it possible to express emotion.
Participants who would like the use of short videos through WhatsApp during learning activities.	All participants said yes to this question.
Participants who would not like the use of short videos through WhatsApp during learning activities.	None.
Participants' reasons for the use of short videos.	-It helps to improve grammar skills. -It helps to learn more expressions in English. -It helps to improve pronunciation.
Participants' perceptions about the uses of voice messages and short videos.	-It is easy to use. -It is funny. -It makes us learn personally. -To understand different accents.

During this study, the improvement in students' Grammar was observed, for example, in the voice messages. This improvement is reflected in the observation notes' good use of grammatical structures. Mistakes in the use of possessive pronouns were reduced. For example, three participants were aware of the difference between 'your' and 'their.' Participants were engaged in self-discovery and self-correction. The following quote of one of the participants depicts this, "I went to the house and see, sorry saw my brother watching the movie...." (SS1)

In the above-directed quote, the participant made a mistake in the second verb, using the verb in simple form instead of the verb in simple past, and he quickly corrected it. Therefore, this behavior was noted as self-discovery errors and self-corrected.

It was also found that students' motivation increased, as noticed in the SS2 continuous question *Teacher! Can I speak about the short*

videos? The energy and the drive-in in most of the participants who wanted to present their findings of short videos on the WhatsApp application reflected their attempts to copy expressions and use them in the classroom.

Their teamwork and excellent cooperation during participants' preparation for both presentations and sending of voice messages were found in the field notes as cooperation and not competition. Also, their expressions of laughter, interjections, and the use of adjectives to describe their voice messages and short videos in the English language, allowed to observe this.

Finally, despite having some mistakes in their voice messages and short videos, participants were able to have more confidence and speak with few or no errors for more than three minutes. Short videos appealed more to them since they were given a chance to select their short movies and send them to the WhatsApp group for all to watch before presentations. Participants were able to include some funny videos that were sometimes relevant to their topics. Funny videos made them feel relaxed after a good laugh, as noticed in one of the participants' comments, "Teacher! I remember to speak about it because it is very funny. (SS3).

Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of English voice messages and short videos using the WhatsApp application to improve communication skills. The improvement in the use of the WhatsApp application was more noticeable in short videos than voice messages. Similarly, the improvement was more related to Grammar and pronunciation.

Lack of communication skills is one of the problems students face when learning English as a second language. Therefore, finding a solution to this problem is significant. Most students in this study look forward to expressing themselves in L2. According to Kovac & Mrsic (2017) learners' attitudes towards speaking a second language increase their self-confidence, which is related to the student's behavior. Hence, a positive impact for students is increased self-confidence during and after using the WhatsApp application. It may be argued that the opportunity to repeat and listen to individual voices both inside and outside the classroom increased confidence in using the language. The results show that most of the participants agree that using voice messages and short videos on WhatsApp would improve their Grammar and pronunciation in their oral communication skills. Based on the field notes, we also noticed an increase in their confidence when speaking English.

In addition, the WhatsApp application created a social bond between students as they listened to and watched videos individually or collectively to react and speak in the classroom. The use of the WhatsApp application has provided neurological value. This finding means that learners can use their brains to think patiently and critically about what is happening in their heads before deciding to send a voice message or watch a short video. As a result, students could focus on finding specific words, paragraphs, and sentences while listening to and watching short English videos through the WhatsApp application.

As argued, the WhatsApp application allows students to create interest and value when they focus on their learning activities (Stepp, 2002). Language teachers need to be creative about incorporating WhatsApp into their lesson plans to avoid the underuse of social networks in the educational sector and the power of social media for learning purposes (Prichard, 2013; Ko, 2019). Also, in this study, some students sent good voice messages and short videos to the WhatsApp group that were not relevant to a particular topic and were too long. Consequently, it is recommended that voice messages and short videos from WhatsApp should not be too long so that students do not miss the purpose of learning English.

There were no significant limitations that could affect the results of this study. The researchers planned to make sure that all limitations were under control. We mention minor ones that were dealt with during the study. For example, there are reported cases of shy students, students who wanted to choose the short videos, and some who did not follow the given instructions. Students were timid to speak out during the first activities on sending voice messages to the WhatsApp group of the class. It was complicated to understand the main idea of their discussion due to their low voice. Some gave excuses for using bad earphones, while some complained about noisy environments. However, there was an improvement after that.

Moreover, students wanted to choose the videos they liked, not according to the learning objectives. It was also discovered that students often got carried away by wanting to continue watching even after the allocated time lapsed. Some students wanted to use their earphones covered with their hands to pretend they were paying attention in the class while still looking at the screens of their phones. Some students had to repeat their activities because they refused to send their short videos and voice messages within the allocated time assigned by the researcher. All efforts were made to make sure that participants followed instructions so that the results of this study were valid and reliable.

The result of this study would be helpful to both language teachers and learners on the use of WhatsApp application in the classroom to

help enhance their oral communication skills, which corroborates other studies (Minalla, 2018). The uses could be extended to the university and other English language institutes in Ecuador. Language teachers could make a proposal to universities and language institutes about the significance of the internet in teaching and learning environments for learners to use WhatsApp in their different classrooms. The increase in the usage of cell phones has given young learners the benefits of using educational applications to learn and do more academic activities without necessarily being in the classroom. The advantages of eLearning are overwhelming in academic cycles. Learners may choose their concentration instantly using tablets and other electronic devices (Main-smith, n.d.). This trend will advocate the acceptance of mobile phones in the classroom since they could be essential learning tools.

Further research could be done on other social applications like Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, QQ, WeChat, and QZone. Using those tools in the EFL classroom is sought to improve oral communication skills and the understanding of complex topics in language teaching. Creativity in using technology in the classroom is always recommended for teaching EFL.

Acknowledgments

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