Whatsapp in the Indonesian Online EFL Learning Milieu: How Do the Students Engage?

Arini Nurul Hidayati
Universitas Siliwangi Tasikmalaya
arininurul@unsil.ac.id

Fuad Abdullah
Universitas Siliwangi Tasikmalaya
fuadabdullah@unsil.ac.id

Melisa Sri
Universitas Siliwangi Tasikmalaya
melisasri@unsil.ac.id

Tenia Ramalia
Universitas Islam Syekh-Yusuf Tangerang
tramalia@unis.ac.id

Widia Yunita
STAIN Hubbulwathan, Bengkalis
widia.yunita@gmail.com

Fera Sulastri
Universitas Siliwangi Tasikmalaya
ferasulastri@unsil.ac.id

ABSTRACT

WhatsApp has been extensively used by many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia as a near synchronous online learning platform. This program enables users to make announcements, exchange ideas and learning materials, and participate in online debates. Some recent publications inform its utilization in learning language, yet little discusses how students engage in the learning activities. Therefore, to fill this void, the present study aims to investigate the students' behavioral engagement during online learning using WhatsApp. To collect the data, this study employed observation and semi-structured interviews. An observation was completed in one class at a state university in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia to perceive how the students responded to the teacher's

instructions during the learning process. Meanwhile, the interviews were conducted with nine students in a similar class. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students engaged behaviourally by (1) posing questions or comments politely, (2) using emoticons and emojis as politeness reinforcements, and (3) confirming the unclear information behind the scene. Implications for teaching and further studies are discussed.

Keywords: EFL learning, online learning, students' behavioral engagement, WhatsApp·

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of the Internet has widened the potential of online learning to spread along with the education environment. So far, online learning has received considerable attention as an alternative to traditional face-to-face and instructor-led education (Douglas & Van Der Vyver, 2004; Hidayati et al., 2021). Online teaching offers a huge opportunity to expand the learning environment for diverse student populations across various ranges of regions. Moreover, the current after-pandemic situation has strengthened the position of online learning to be the solution for distance learning (Hidayati et al., 2021). In online learning, teachers usually utilize several strategies and applications that support them in delivering materials, communicating with students, sharing information, and conducting discussions (Irianti & Sulastri, 2018; Ramalia, 2021). Among the applications, WhatsApp Messenger is present as one of the most commonly used applications in the Indonesian EFL teaching and learning milieu.

As a handy and friendly-user application, WhatsApp has been preferred to assist language teachers in facilitating the learning process. Its utilization has provided many benefits, especially in enhancing students' English vocabularies (Bensalem, 2018; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Jafari & Chalak, 2016), improving their reading and writing skills (Ahmed, 2019; Susanti & Tarmuji, 2016), boosting the students' learning motivation as well as reducing their learning anxiety (Ali & Bin-Hady 2019; Indaryani & Suliworo, 2018), and more importantly, helping teachers deliver instructions (Alshammari, 2017) which are commonly sent in the chat groups feature (Amry, 2014). Due to these potential advantages, WhatsApp chat groups are currently getting more popular among language teachers and educators.

In the recent learning trends in which many schools and universities in Indonesia implement online learning, teachers and lecturers require extra effort to effectively attract students to stay engaged. Zhang, et al. (2007) inform that students require teachers to promote online discussion forums

to provide guidance, which makes them more comfortable in the discussion. To meet this challenge, this research believes that teachers need to play the role of a mentor. In other words, students' participation in the online learning platforms is shown by the positive reactions of all parties in the online environment. Very, Unfortunately, it is a really hard effort to make sure that all students give full attention during online learning, because the teachers could not control their activities and movements constantly.

Considering the difficulties in online learning, teachers must consider students' involvement in the learning process. This refers to the students' engagement to the degree of attention, effort, participation, interest, and enthusiasm shown by students when they are learning or being taught and it relates to students' investment in learning and their commitment to achieving learning goals. In this context, students' engagement is a multidimensional concept that is generally considered to include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Although there are three types of engagement, behavioral engagement has been studied the most extensively concerning student achievement and graduation rates (Brophy, 1988). Behavioral engagement can be observed when students contribute to classroom discussion, participate in academic tasks, and prove that they are listening to the teacher's instruction, especially in an online learning atmosphere, behavioral engagement can be observed. The literature shows that students with a high sense of belonging, teacher and peer support, and positive expectations show higher behavioral engagement and obtain good learning outcomes (Wooley & Bowen, 2007). The pioneering work by Finn (1989) saw that students' behavioral engagement while participating in classroom activities is a starting point for good grades and identification with school.

Many studies have discussed students' engagement in EFL contexts (Harunasari & Halim, 2019; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021), yet rarely do studies discuss students' behavioral engagement during online learning, especially in the WhatsApp-mediated online learning (Rabbianty et al., 2021). Therefore, the current study is an investigative attempt to answer the following research question (RQ), "How do the EFL students engage behaviorally in the WhatsApp-mediated online learning?" under the concept of behavioral engagement articulated by Fredricks et al., (1996). It measures the students' behavioral engagement in terms of time-on-task, student persistence in completing the assigned work, and the level of effort the student invests in completing the tasks. It also considers the students'

behavior in following the instructions when learning and participating online.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement is an observable act of students while participating in learning, it refers to students' participation in academic activities and efforts to perform academic tasks. Fredricks et al., (2016) define behavioral engagement as the students' behavior in learning tasks, including students' persistence, effort, and contribution to their learning. They continued that in recent studies, behavioral engagement is defined in terms of student participation, effort, attention, persistence, and positive conduct towards the learning activity. This notion concludes that behavioral engagement is defined in the context of specific field engagement, including asking and answering questions, participating, persisting, or giving up easily without paying attention. In addition, student-teacher interaction is very important, because a strong and positive relationship between students and teachers is essential to increasing students' behavioral engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997). This teacher support can take the form of any classroom activity in which the teacher is directly involved with a student or group of students (e.g., one-on-one instruction or group work).

WhatsApp Group: A Near Synchronous Learning Forum

WhatsApp group provides pedagogical, social, and technological benefits supporting the implementation of online learning to deliver certain announcements, share ideas and learning resources, and have online discussions (Amry, 2014). It can also increase the students' motivation and accelerate the development of knowledge in the study group. In addition, online learning with the help of WhatsApp can enhance students' collaboration, share useful knowledge and information, and maintain the joy of learning. In short, participation, collaboration, and fun learning are the values the students could gain amid the learning process since it provides several benefits, such as their collaborative usage, free download, easy to use, availability for sharing comments, text, images, videos, sounds, and documents, ease to post announcements and publish their work in the groups, creation, and dissemination of information and knowledge easily (Jimoyiannis, Tsiotakis, Roussinos, & Siorenta, 2013). Given this fact, the WhatsApp group is considered effective to use as an EFL teaching platform.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was employed to investigate the students' behavioral engagement in an EFL class during WhatsApp-mediated online learning. The design was used as a strategy used to answer the "how" question in this study (Yin, 2009) and that providing a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). For example, in this case, students' experiences, values, and knowledge of the online learning process and the class, were dependent upon and contained within a specific context.

Setting and Participants

In a qualitative study, the participant selection aims to locate information-rich individuals or cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In line with this, an appropriate sampling strategy should be purposeful and be based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the researchers purposefully chose to invite participation from one cohort of fourth-semester EFL students in a state university in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. Twenty-nine students of class B from an EFL class (12 males; 17 females) were recruited to be observed. This class was chosen because of their enthusiasm to participate in this study. Furthermore, nine of the students (3 males; 6 females) were selected for further interviews. The selection criteria were decided due to the students' activeness in the WhatsApp group; 3 of them were very active, 3 others were active, and 3 students were less active. Before the data collection, the participants were informed to fill in a consent form to declare their willingness as well as protect their confidentiality.

The technique of Collecting the Data

To answer the research question, the researchers used observation and semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The observation was conducted by looking at the textual communication done by students in WhatsApp groups during the classes to evaluate how they question and respond to the teacher's instructions. It was conducted in a listening and speaking class in three meetings. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify students' participation, effort, attention, persistence, and positive conduct regarding the online learning on WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp Messenger from August-September 2021.

The technique of Analysing the Data

Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the obtained data (Braun and Clarke. (2006). This analysis method covers the following steps, (1) Familiarizing with the data; reading and rereading the interview transcript and observation to take notes or mark ideas to get the initial codes, (2) Generating initial codes; organizing the data in a meaningful and systematic way into small chunks meaning, addressing specific research questions then analyzing the data, relating the data based on the aims of the research and then categorizing using the initials codes to highlight students' behavioral engagement (3) Searching for themes; selecting the data transcript and screenshots and finding out something significant or interesting (4) Reviewing potential themes; developing or modifying identified themes in search for them to ensure the placement of the code has been grouped into the appropriate theme. (5) Defining and naming the themes; identifying the essence of what each theme is about, determining and giving names to the theme based on the data obtained, namely about students' behavioral engagement in WhatsApp-mediated online learning, (7) Producing the report; displaying the final draft in the article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Posing questions or comments politely

Students' persistence reflects their commitment to completing the course and study plan. Persistence is considered a positive outcome measure (Cookson, 1988) and it indicates a positive behavioral engagement. In an online learning environment, persistence is usually defined as completing online courses and related to online behaviors such as participation and discussion. In line with that, WhatsApp as a learning platform has been providing a positive experience for most participants. This encouraged them to contribute to the learning activities by actively commenting on every teacher's instruction and questioning the teacher anytime they needed to confirm particular information. According to the participants' statements, they always considered etiquette and politeness once they commented or replied to the teacher's instruction and asked questions. The following excerpts support.

Excerpt 1

Adi: "To respond to a piece of information that the lecturer gave, the first thing I did was to read the information carefully and carefully so that there would be no misinterpretation/misunderstanding. Only then, do I reply to the

message/information by paying attention to etiquette in sending messages? The examples are:
- *All right, sir/ma'am. Thank you for the information* 🙏
  - *Noted, sir/ma'am. Thank you* 🙏 "

Excerpt 2
Dewi: "During online learning on WhatsApp, the lecturer often conveys messages about approval and other info. I usually respond to her with expressions of agreement or disapproval, also thanking her for the information to show my respect. The examples are:
- *Thank you for the information, Ma'am* 🙏
- *See you too, Ma'am. Have a nice day* 🏃
- *I agree, Ma'am* 🙏 "

The students mentioned that they participated actively in the online class by giving positive or negative responses depending on the given information. Furthermore, they also considered the language use based on the politeness patterns and ethics applied in the Indonesian context. The students' sensitivity to the language use, form, and context showed that they have high critical language awareness (Hidayati, et al., 2019). In line with this, Molinari (2004) mentions that etiquette allows students to link to group members, group processes, and learning contents. This leads them to build their soft skills in online learning which embed the value of education, and the ability to implement the contents and correlate them with realities (Sener, 2012). Furthermore, the students' interaction in the WhatsApp group indicates their learning satisfaction which is central to the education experience (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). To strengthen the arguments, the following screenshots were taken from the observation.

Figure 1 A Students' question to the teacher

Picture 2 Students' responses to a teacher's instruction

Picture 1 illustrates the way a student asked a question about the given task. She would like to confirm the earlier instruction and ask whether she could upload the overtime video that she had made or if she needed to retake it. This student began her message by greeting "Assalamu' alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh". As Brown and Levinson (1987), Ferguson (1981), and Laver (1979) pointed out that it is commonly used as a ritualized politeness greeting in general Islamic society. Since the majority of students in this class were Muslim, so was the teacher. Furthermore, the students usually asked for an apology before coming up to the body of the message. After revealing the content, the student closed the question by thanking the teacher. Culturally speaking, this messaging pattern fulfilled the politeness requirement based on the accepted values in the surrounding.

In a similar vein, Picture 2 also reveals the students' ways of responding to the teacher's instruction. All of them commenced their reply by posing greetings "Wa'alaikumsalam, Good morning." These expressions were aimed at showing their politeness. Huang (2008) argues that politeness views among people are different depending on cultures. What the Indonesian people considered to be polite might not be right for western people and vice versa. Moreover, Holmes (2001) and Cutting (2002) contend that politeness is significantly related to word selection to fit the right situations. The greetings selected by the students were the most appropriate dictions to show respect to teachers in Indonesian contexts. By showing that, the students are successful to perform a polite profile which is appreciated by the education community. Furthermore, greetings are also one of the characteristics of a good social manner (Soo et al., 2011; Hei et al., 2013).

Politeness strategies in online texts can also be distinguished based on gender. It is said that women tend to use longer texts than men (Pratama, 2019). They also use abbreviations and emoticons significantly more than men and the younger they are, the more abbreviations they use (Ling, 2005). A longer message is supposed to convey more information to clear off misunderstandings.

Han & Hyland (2015) stated that the teachers should carefully plan their strategies to enhance the students' engagement. WhatsApp as a platform for information sharing tasks has received very positive feedback from participants, indicating that it is a promising virtual tool and environment that can promote interaction in English learning. This will potentially improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning experience (Boyinbode et al., 2017). To conclude, the finding informs that WhatsApp has given meaningful online learning activities that can encourage EFL students to engage positively, and therefore, it is recommended to utilize as a learning platform for university students.

Using emoticons or emojis as politeness reinforcements

As mentioned earlier, cultures differ in the politeness strategies of a particular society. In the research context in which communication is built in the cyber community, the potential to form different politeness strategies is widely open. This type of communication has been infiltrating human life and transforming the principle and features of politeness (Pratama, 2019). He continues that the shift of politeness pattern in online learning is through the presence of multimodal texts in the message. Multimodality in this context means that during cyber communication, people tend to share information not only by texts but also through pictures, sounds, and even videos. These modes are considered as the representation of human expression when attending to cyber communication.

WhatsApp emoticons are becoming an important tool as an online facilitator for communication for the primary reason that emoticons can enhance the messages and can help the students to express emotions or feelings (Kannan & Shreya, 2017; Lestari, 2019). In addition, (Kavanagh, 2016) contends that WhatsApp emoticons also help convey positive politeness strategies. An emoticon is a combination of two words – Emotion and icon (MacAlpine, 2014). Primarily, emoticons were created with a combination of symbols and punctuations. This is also defined as facial emotions or a combination of characters and text messages to show the writer's mood (Crystal, 2001). At least, four of many factors, such as anxiety,

attitude, ability, and motivation affect students' learning, especially in the online environment. Those emotional patterns were usually represented through particular emoticons.

Excerpt 3

Cici: *"Emoticons in WhatsApp are commonly used by students when studying online. These emoticons seem to be able to increase the level of politeness of a message being conveyed because it is like representing my feelings. Such as, a hand that is pleading or is holding hands while looking down symbolizes forgiveness. Although the original meaning might be different… students, including I, consider this emoticon to be an emoticon that must be used at the end of a message when chatting with teachers/lecturers."*

Excerpt 4

Nila: *"On WhatsApp, I only do textual communication, thus, I'm afraid that other people will misunderstand what I wrote. So, to show my welcome and interest…, I like to use emoticons. Simply, it shows what I feel, because people do not see my facial expression in chat…"*

Students' attitudes toward online learning may vary. They may feel excited, happy, confident, and adequate, or may feel bored, frustrated, and inadequate. Amidst the online learning through WhatsApp, the students frequently expressed their attitudes by inserting emoticons in some parts of their chats. Kannan & Shreya (2019) asserted that it is important to comprehend facial expressions since emoticons 'are graphic icons that determine the emotion or mood as seen on a person's face (p. 55).' There were certain emoticons the students used to reveal their moods.

The following screenshots taken from observation exemplify the most frequent WhatsApp Emoticons shown during the interaction.

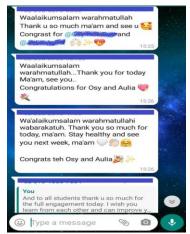**Figure 3** Common emoticons used by students

Figure 4 Other frequently used emoticons

Those two pictures inform the WhatsApp emoticons that mostly appeared to represent the students' feelings, as follows.

☺ = shy but excited

😊 = smiling

🌟 = keeping up the spirit

🙏 = apologizing / thanking / greeting

🥰 = grateful/showing closeness

🤗 = hugging/showing warmth

These students' facial expression representation can help them express their learning satisfaction as the result of the performance of any educational institution. Satisfaction relates to the students' contribution in terms of motivation, learning, assurance, and retention (Biner et al., 1996). Mensink & King (2020) described that contribution as the conclusion of the efforts of teachers and students, and it shows students' interest in learning. In addition, psychological factors are factors that are psychologically or spiritually related to a student's contribution to learning. As one of the internal factors, psychological conditions may affect the online learning process. (Irawan et al., 2020) investigated students' psychological impacts on online learning during the pandemic of Covid-19. Those issues are students feeling saturated with online education, lockdown, and social distancing cause students' anxiety because of a lack of interpersonal communication, and economic issues, especially for those whose parents are

from lower economic status, since they need to provide internet cost during online learning. It may lead to students' emotional disorders and reflect on their communication, in this case, WhatsApp-mediated learning.

Confirming the unclear information behind the scene

Students have diverse personality types that influence their learning preferences. Those who feel insecure in the WhatsApp Group textual communication tend to be inactive both in commenting and questioning. Instead of posting messages in WhatsApp groups, they would secretly send private chats to their colleagues or teacher to confirm particular issues. Some of the students in this class experienced such a feeling. In the interviews, they articulated:

Excerpt 5

Dany: *"I usually prefer to confirm the unclear information to my friends to my understanding. For example, I asked Alisa, "Alisa, did the assignment from Mrs. Ann mean that we have to watch the video and then we record it, right?" I did this because I was too shy to read to many students, therefore, I prefer this way. I sometimes chat with the lecturer as well, if it is too urgent."*

Excerpt 6

Cici: "Many of us like to ask questions behind the group, so we are more comfortable asking questions to friends or chatting in the class group without lecturers. This is because I'm too shy, I think... and fear being wrong. From my personal experience, I once asked a question in the group but the responses from the lecturer and friends seemed as if my question was wrong and stupid, so I felt humiliated. So, I was a little afraid of the responses and judgments were given by other people."

Students' learning styles and preferences need to be considered in the teaching and learning circumstance since it is an important factor that has a significant influence on e-learning. (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010). Teachers might face extroverted and introverted students. Those who are introverted usually find themselves insecure in sending messages in the WhatsApp Group because they are afraid of the negative evaluation from their teacher and counterparts. This condition promotes learning anxiety which potentially impacts learning success (Hidayati et al., 2020). Furthermore, Peacock (2011) argues that a lack of compatibility between the learning styles and teaching styles could lead to student frustration and harm

learning. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to facilitate the students who feel hesitant to contribute to the group's textual communication.

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed that students' behavioral engagement is a fundamental aspect that affects students to contribute or not contribute to online learning. If the students showed high results in each aspect of engagement, they will potentially get better learning outcomes. Several points can be concluded from this study; firstly, the students' behavioral engagement during online class was positive in all three aspects; students' persistence, students' contribution, and students efforts. They frequently replied to the teacher's instructions, gave questions, and discussed the unclear instructions indicating their active participation in the classroom, including their positive behavior towards the teacher and classroom activities.

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