

# The Impact of WhatsApp on EFL Learners' Reading Skills: A Narrative Literature Review

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## Abstract

This review synthesizes existing research on the impact of WhatsApp on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' reading skills. Employing a systematic approach, the study utilizes journal articles retrieved from databases like ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, focusing on publications between 2019 and 2024. Relevant keywords like "technology in EFL classrooms" and "WhatsApp for language learning" guided the search process. The snowballing technique further enriched the literature pool by examining references from identified articles. The review underscores WhatsApp's potential to enhance EFL reading comprehension. Studies demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting reading engagement and improving comprehension scores. Building upon these insights, the review suggests future research directions. These include investigating the specific mechanisms by which WhatsApp and similar platforms contribute to learning outcomes, exploring its effectiveness for different learner demographics, and examining potential drawbacks like information overload and distractions. Finally, the review emphasizes the need to develop best practices for integrating WhatsApp into EFL reading instruction, providing educators with guidelines on content selection, fostering meaningful interactions, and ensuring academic integrity.

## 1. Introduction

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This era is characterized by the prevalence of intelligent mobile devices and applications, as well as the widespread influence of social media. In addition to interpersonal communication, individuals utilize their mobile devices for a diverse array of functions. Undeniably, mobile communication devices have become indispensable in our daily lives since the introduction of smartphones and other advanced technologies.

In contemporary times, individuals of various age groups, including young students, have the ability to use mobile applications on smart devices at any location and at any given moment (Mehtälä et al., 2024). Students predominantly utilize their mobile devices as their primary mode of accessing the internet and participating in educational endeavors (Guan, 2024).

Today's young students possess technologically advanced, digital, and electronic minds. They readily adapt to the latest technological advancements. They possess a considerable amount of knowledge regarding globalization and its components (Drigas et al., 2023). Throughout the most of the day, they are completely absorbed in their smartphones. Due to the prevalence of social media, smartphone apps, and smart device usage, young students gradually get disinterested in studying conventional curricula and textbooks.

Nevertheless, with time, these smartphone applications increasingly become indispensable for everyday life, including education. The advent of mobile apps has significantly facilitated our lives and has also spawned a novel means of accessing educational resources. Specialists assert that these significant transformations are exerting growing strain on conventional teaching and learning paradigms.

## 2. Literature Review

In the contemporary educational landscape, students are awash in a diverse sea of digital platforms that cater to their academic pursuits. From the sprawling social networks of Facebook and Twitter to the engaging multimedia havens of YouTube and MP3s, the digital realm offers a plethora of resources for enriching the learning experience (Carr, 2020). However, amidst this abundance, one platform stands out for its unique ability to facilitate communication and collaboration in the educational sphere: WhatsApp, affectionately known as WA.

Introduced in 2009 as a simple instant messaging app, WA has ballooned into a global phenomenon, boasting a staggering two billion monthly users (Statista, 2022). This meteoric rise has attracted the keen eye of researchers, who are increasingly exploring WA's potential as an educational tool across diverse disciplines. Studies have delved into its efficacy in language learning (Farahian & Parhamnia, 2022), midwifery (Gonenc et al., 2021), and even computing (Güler, 2017; Alshaibani & Qusti, 2021). Notably, a recent analysis by Manca (2020) positioned WA as the most researched language learning tool among social media giants like Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat, highlighting its burgeoning significance in the field. This widespread interest stems from the innovative learning opportunities WA's communication features unlock, demonstrably enhancing EFL instruction both within the confines of the classroom and beyond.

WhatsApp, with its instant messaging and multimedia capabilities, has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing various English language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, this review study specifically focuses on its impressive potential in developing EFL learners' reading comprehension skills.

Reading is the cognitive activity of acquiring knowledge and information by comprehending written language, including of textual content, symbols, and visual depictions. Moreover, reading serves as a method of comprehending and using the significance of written material in various situations, such as acquiring knowledge, appreciating a piece of literature, or sparking one's inquisitiveness (Alarifi, 2023). According to Pressley et al., (2023), readers should align their goals with the setting, material, and style of reading. Hence, it is imperative that educators and learners possess the crucial skill of comprehending written text, as it enables them to extract pertinent information from written materials.

The WhatsApp app is a mobile application designed primarily to facilitate rapid communication. Because of WA's inherent simplicity as a means of communication, individuals from all nationalities and backgrounds utilize it extensively for a wide range of purposes. It facilitates the transmission of documents, photos, messages, audio, video, and web pages.

One of the key strengths of WhatsApp for reading practice lies in its ability to facilitate the creation of vibrant reading communities. These communities provide learners with a platform to share and actively discuss articles, news stories, or even excerpts from literary works. This collaborative approach fosters engaged reading, as individuals analyze texts together, exchange interpretations, and clarify any doubts through instant messaging.

Furthermore, WhatsApp's multimedia features add another layer to the learning experience. Learners can enhance their pronunciation and fluency by practicing audio-supported reading through features like voice notes and video calls. This creates opportunities for teachers to conduct live reading sessions, answer questions in real-time, and provide personalized feedback, further propelling the learning process.

Moreover, WhatsApp's ability to share multimedia content plays a significant role in enriching comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Learners can access and discuss infographics, images, and videos

related to their reading materials, providing valuable visual aids that deepen their understanding and solidify their grasp of new vocabulary.

Thus, this review study deals with the following objective;

To evaluate the role of WhatsApp in developing the reading skills among EFL learners in Pakistan's educational context.

### 3. Methodology

This article aims to review and discuss existing research on the impact of using WhatsApp on the reading skills of EFL learners in Pakistan. To achieve this, the primary data source was journal articles retrieved from digital databases like Science Direct and Google Scholar. These platforms were specifically searched for articles published between 2019 and 2024, focusing on relevant keywords such as technology in EFL classrooms, social media in education, WhatsApp for language learning, and reading comprehension. Additionally, the snowballing method was employed, where relevant references from the initial selection were examined to broaden the scope of relevant literature. The snowballing search strategy can be simplified into three steps (Webster, & Watson, 2002). The first step is to acquire a fundamental compilation of papers and perform a search in esteemed journals and conference proceedings. Then, analyze the reference lists of the relevant publications found in the earlier steps (1 and 2) backward (repeat this process until no more papers are found). Finally, continue by identifying articles that reference the articles that were identified in the previous rounds. This approach ensured the review remained focused on recent studies, excluding those published before 2019. After downloading and thoroughly reading the identified articles, a detailed examination was conducted to understand how WhatsApp contributes to the development of reading skills among EFL learners in Pakistan's educational context.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The role of Reading Skills in language learning

Reading stands as a cornerstone of language acquisition, fostering comprehensive linguistic competency. Notably, Alneyadi et al. (2023) underscore the link between strong reading comprehension and impactful writing, while Kusumarasyati (2023) highlights its centrality to students' academic success. Defined as the ability to engage effectively with written content (Erlidawati, 2023), reading proficiency encompasses diverse skills. These skills include inferring meaning, identifying authorial perspectives, assessing tone, and problem-solving (Erlidawati, 2023). Dicaldo et al. (2023) further expand on this, listing skills such as: understanding the writing system, utilizing strategies for unfamiliar words, comprehending explicit and implicit information, pinpointing key sentences, discerning communicative value, recognizing textual connections through cohesion devices, identifying main ideas and cues, and differentiating supporting details (Dicaldo et al., 2023). Fang (2023) adds to this by emphasizing abilities like literal and contextual comprehension, drawing conclusions, interpreting metaphors, identifying key concepts, and making judgments. Finally, Umek (2023) highlights the multifaceted nature of reading, encompassing: recognition of formal discourse structures, a robust vocabulary and understanding of sentence structures, prior knowledge, information synthesis and evaluation, metacognition, and self-monitoring of reading comprehension (Umek, 2023). Through these diverse aspects, reading empowers individuals to engage meaningfully with the written world, fostering not only language acquisition but also critical thinking and overall academic success.

In essence, the key takeaway from these studies is that reading empowers individuals on a multifaceted level, not only equipping them with language but also nurturing critical thinking skills and paving the way for academic success.

### 4.2 The Impact of Social Media on English Language Learning in Pakistan

The pervasiveness of social media in today's society is undeniable (Khaliq et al., 2022). Its influence extends to various aspects of modern life, including commerce, education, communication, and knowledge dissemination. This impact is particularly noteworthy in the context of English language learning in Pakistan, where individuals actively utilize social media platforms to enhance their proficiency.

Studies by Khaliq et al. (2022) and Abbas et al. (2019) highlight the positive influence of social media on education, specifically on English language acquisition. Learners leverage a diverse range of platforms like blogs, wikis, WhatsApp, YouTube, and social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, for educational purposes. Engaging in communication through these platforms fosters the development of vocabulary, communication skills, and grammatical competence, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Kauser and Awan (2019) emphasize the remarkable growth of social media as a platform for content creation, dissemination, and organization. The readily available, user-friendly nature of these platforms facilitates a more interconnected global society, fostering opportunities for language learning through exposure to diverse content and interactions with native speakers.

While acknowledging the positive aspects, it is crucial to recognize that social media can also have potential drawbacks on language acquisition. Recognizing both the benefits and challenges is essential for maximizing the potential of social media as a valuable tool for English language learning in Pakistan.

### 4.3 Reading Behavior and Digital Gadgets

Studies suggest a shift towards online information sources for those spending significant time online (Adeyemi, 2021; Coiro, 2021; Vyas & Tandel, 2020). This potentially reduces engagement with traditional media like academic reading, leisure reading, or television. Saaid & Wahab (2014) propose a positive influence of digital gadgets and internet access on reading habits. However, Zia et al. (2019) highlight a distinction between purposes. Learners often turn to digital media for recreational reading, while relying on print for academic purposes.

Merchant (2022) found that many university students value visual learning methods for academic success. This aligns with the growing consensus that digital content surpasses textbooks due to its advantages: Nonlinearity and interactivity (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020; Mumtaz et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2020; Parikh et al., 2020); Convenient access to information in various formats (text, video, audio) (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Alfallaj, 2020).

While digital tools may influence traditional reading habits, they also offer new avenues for engaging with information. Research suggests a complex relationship, with purpose and format playing a significant role in how Pakistanis consume content in the digital age.

### 4.4 Use of WhatsApp for Reading Skills

Mujayanah et al. (2023) investigated the intriguing question of how using WhatsApp influences the reading comprehension of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia. Their study employed a questionnaire and revealed that a significant number of participants frequently used WhatsApp for reading activities. Notably, the most popular reading materials included new articles, fiction, literature, and non-fiction books. Furthermore, a majority of these learners dedicated 1-2 hours daily to WhatsApp-based reading, drawn primarily to its convenience and accessibility.

These findings from Mujayanah et al. (2023) shed valuable light on the intricate relationship between WhatsApp use and reading comprehension among EFL learners. Their research paves the way for further exploration and refinement of this technology's potential to enhance language learning, particularly in the domain of reading comprehension.

Building on this research, Tümen & Çelik (2022) investigated students' views on the method and impact of distributing reading assignments through WhatsApp on their English reading comprehension scores. Their study employed an experimental group utilizing a WhatsApp group with an incentive system, and this group outperformed the control group in a statistically significant manner. This suggests that the WhatsApp group intervention had a positive impact on student performance. Additionally, the study found that most students in the experimental group perceived WhatsApp as enhancing their understanding of the subject. This subjective data further supports the potential effectiveness of the intervention, though further research is needed to explore the specific mechanisms at play.

Similarly, the study by Chai & Basri (2020) aimed to investigate if WhatsApp could encourage elementary school students who are averse to reading to engage in longer and more rigorous reading by offering various creative and enjoyable activities. This research explored the specific challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for educators to demonstrate creativity and originality in creating instructional modules and learning activities to enhance students' global competitiveness. The study focused on the context of Malaysian educators who had to shift to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. Employing a multimodal approach, data was collected using student work and replies, instructional materials, and teachers' reflective notebooks. The data were then narratively assessed to demonstrate how WhatsApp was used to promote children's reading. This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating digital tools, especially messaging apps, into the educational process to maintain younger students' interest and motivation.

Overall, these studies highlight the potential benefits of using WhatsApp and similar digital tools in the educational process, particularly for enhancing EFL reading comprehension. Future research can explore the effectiveness of this approach with other student populations and in different learning areas.

## 5. Conclusion

This review has explored the multifaceted nature of reading skills in language learning, the impact of social media on English language acquisition in Pakistan, and the evolving relationship between reading behavior and digital gadgets. Here's a summary of the key takeaways:

Reading proficiency is fundamental for language acquisition, fostering critical thinking and academic success. Social media platforms offer valuable tools for English language learners in Pakistan, providing exposure to diverse content and interaction opportunities. Digital tools have a complex influence on reading habits, offering new avenues for information access while potentially impacting engagement with traditional media. WhatsApp presents a promising avenue for enhancing EFL reading comprehension, with studies demonstrating its effectiveness in promoting reading engagement and improving comprehension scores.

Building on these insights, this review presents several recommendations for future research. It recommends to investigate the specific mechanisms by which social media platforms like WhatsApp contribute to EFL reading comprehension. This could involve analyzing user behavior patterns and content types that lead to optimal learning outcomes. Moreover, it suggests exploring the effectiveness of WhatsApp-based interventions for different learner demographics and language learning contexts. Studies could compare the impact on students of varying ages, proficiency levels, and learning backgrounds. This review also recommends to examine the potential drawbacks associated with using social media and digital tools for language learning. Research could investigate issues like information overload, exposure to inaccurate content, and distractions impacting focused reading. Finally, this also recommends developing best practices for integrating digital tools like WhatsApp into EFL reading instruction. This could involve creating guidelines for educators on selecting appropriate content, fostering meaningful interactions, and ensuring academic integrity.

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## Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

*The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Abdul Rasheed and Dr Sarala; **data collection:** Abdul Rasheed; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Abdul Rasheed; **draft manuscript preparation:** Abdul Rasheed. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*



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