Enhancing English Proficiency among DKM1 Students: Improving Communicative Skills using WhatsApp Application

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Abstarct
The action research is aimed to improve communicative skills among students in carrying out group discussion. This research involved 40 students from DKM1S3 of Politeknik Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin June 2017 session. The objective of the research is to increase students' performance in carrying out group discussion with the help of Whatsapp Application. The methodologies used are quantitative and qualitative methods. The data collection was gathered through pre-test and post-test and questionnaire. Based on the data gathered in pre-test, it was found that 60% of the students only managed to score C and another 40% D for their interactive skills in group discussion. Therefore, several actions were implemented in order to help the students improved their communicative skills. The action plans conducted include implementation of various communicative activities in class such as role-play, debate, games and practising the skills through WhatsApp Application. Based on the actions conducted, the post-test result has shown positive improvement in their communicative skills where 2.5% and 6% of the students managed to score A and B respectively. It was supported by their positive feedback on the questionnaire given. The results of the action implemented showed that the communicative skills among the students could be improved if they are given suitable methods and platform to encourage them to practice their skills.

Keywords: Communicative skills; Group discussion

Reflection (Problem statement)
The use of technology has become a vital part of every aspect of life including educational environment. According to Warschauer & Healey (1998) the use of computers to assist learning, better known as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has gain popularity in language studies since 1995. However due to the development of the technology and information era, people use a variety of application. WhatsApp is an instant messaging application for smartphones that operates under a subscription business model. It is a cross-platform application that uses the Internet to send text messages, images, videos, user location and audio media messages. Hence, making this application widely used by the students for its advanced computing capabilities and connectivity (Andrew & Tanzeem, 2012)

Using a familiar application in the classroom environment may help students to overcome some anxiety problems. The anxiety problems that faced by the students including lack of confidence, vocabulary and lack of knowledge. Anxiety is a major problem for EFL classroom (Han, Tanriover & Sahan, 2016). Students nowadays tend to engage with their smart-phones with the internet access all the time and it has been proven that WhatsApp Messenger is one of the most popular application with 30.496.683 downloads in PlayStore (WhatsApp Official Webpage). WhatsApp Application could be the best platform

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or medium for the students to involve more in class activities and the group discussion. Martin and Ertzberger (2013) studied the difference between the use of computers and mobile phones in a classroom setting and found that students show more enthusiasm towards mobile devices. The WhatsApp Application has been welcomed by the students and lecturers.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has been researched in several aspects in terms of assisting language learning such as pronunciation skills, vocabulary, speaking and listening, reading and grammar. Using WhatsApp activities in EFL speaking classes has become popular nowadays as it allows unique and versatile learning opportunities. The students will get many benefits from MALL which allow consistent engagement with peers working in groups, enhancing opportunities and improving learning styles (Beckmann, 2010). Students are able to practice their pronunciation (accent, intonation, and speed of speech) while rehearsing for the recording and expose themselves to positive feelings towards speaking. Based on the researcher's experience in teaching semester 1 students, 65% of the students from the East-Coast state in Malaysia like Kelantan and Terengganu were having problem in their conversation especially in their pronunciation and accent. Another 35% of the students who were from west coast state such as Selangor, Melaka and Penang, could speak better as they were more confident in using the language. However, misinterpretation was unavoidable because of absence of mastery of words and its collocations. Hence, when WhatsApp were introduced in the teaching and learning session, students were seen to be more enthusiastic and engaged with the activities as they were familiar with the device.

The use of MALL is an innovative educational technology in higher education (Alavinia & Qoitassi, 2013). In Politeknik Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin (PSMZA), based on the previous result for semester 1, 80% of the students scored low marks (range 5-10/20 marks) for Group Discussion. Lecturers expected their students to involve actively in the group discussion. While, a few students were involved in the discussion, most of them were passive and did not participate in the discussion and pretended to keep silent. Less-confidence students tend to be passive in the group discussion, do not respond to their member's questions or rarely asks questions to the group members although they need to do that in maintaining the group discussion. Lecturers blamed that these happened because students have lack of confidence, reluctant and afraid of speaking in English Language. This was challenge for all lecturers to help passive students to become active students. Research about the students' barrier factors to communicate in a speaking class was conducted by Mufanti (2015) which showed that students were worry, scare, shy, not confident and uncomfortable to communicate in English.

Effective discussion involves different perspectives and different skills to create an inclusive environment. In order to do so, it is important to consider the features of effective discussions, and conditions that promote small group interaction and engagement. Discussion is a powerful mechanism for active

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learning; a well-facilitated discussion allows the participant to explore new ideas while recognizing and valuing the contributions of others (Potential Problems in Discussions; adapted from: Center for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning Handbook, accessed July 2010). In PSMZA, students seemed to be lack in communicative skills that help them to carry out an effective group discussion. Based on the previous performance of semester 1 June 2017 session, 70% of the students were having problems in turn taking, interruption and clarification skills. About 60 % of the students failed to give relevant justification of ideas based on current issues because they were lack of knowledge and exposure.

According to Chen & Chung (2010), learning forms have changed from traditional classroom learning to electronic learning and mobile-learning. From these two effective learning devices, mobile learning is beneficial and flexible. Mobile learning can overcome the limitation of time and space and empower learners to study whenever and wherever feasible. Hence, it is believed that students' performance could be improved with implementation of WhatsApp Application in teaching and learning.

Research Focus

The focus of this research is to enhance the students' ability to use the communicative skills when carry out a group discussion. Students' communicative skills were evaluated using the rubric of DUE1012 Group Discussion which holds 20% of the students' assessment marks. The rubric is based on 3 criteria; language, interactive skills and content. However, this research only focuses on interactive skills which can identify students' ability in carrying out group discussion using all the communicative skills. In addition to that, WhatsApp Application is used to enhance the students' communication skills in group discussion. Hence, this study is important to encourage students to improve their speaking skills while using WhatsApp Application.

Research Objective

General Objective

The general objective of this research is to increase students' performance in carrying out group discussion by using WhatsApp application.

Specific Objective
1. To enhance students' communicative skills in group discussion
2. To identify the students' interest in learning English
3. To identify students' understanding of the communicative skills in group discussion
4. To find out students' perceptions in using WhatsApp application in enhancing their English language proficiency

Target Group

The target group of this research is 40 DKM1S3 students of June 2017 session in PSMZA.

Methodology

The process of data collection is done by using qualitative and quantitative method in where pre-test, post-test and survey using questionnaires were conducted throughout the period of research.

a) Pre-Test and Post-Test

The pre-test was given at the beginning of the research before any treatment was carry out. The pre-test was conducted to identify the students' ability to use the communicative skills when carry out a group discussion. This pre-test was done before the action plan and students had to carry out a group discussion according to DUE1012 Group Discussion Assessment Rubric. After the treatment, the post-test was carried out to measure students' ability to conduct a group discussion using all the communicative skills. The results would show whether there are any differences in the result and whether the treatments were effective.

b) Questionnaires

The questionnaires were distributed after the post-test for the students to fill it up. The questionnaire was administered to elicit the following particulars: demography, students' interest in learning the English subject, Students' understanding of the skills in group discussion and students' perceptions in improving communicative skills using WhatsApp Application. The results in the questionnaire were used to support the findings of the post-test.

Findings of the Study.

Analysis of Pre –Test

The pre-test marks were analysed as below:

Table 1: Result of pre-test

CRITERIA		NUM OF THE STUDENTS	
Grades	Marks	Num of Students	Percentage (%)
A	17-20	0	0%
B	13-16	0	0%
C	9-12	24	60%
D	5-8	16	40%
E	1-4	0	0%
Total		40	100%

Based on Table 1, none of the students scored A, B and E, 24 students scored C (60%) while another 16 students could only score D (40%). The

analysis showed the percentage of communicative skills tested during the group discussion (pre-test). The marks given were according to DUE1012 Group Discussion rubric. During the pre-test, students were asked to carry out group discussion in a group of 4 members. They need to discuss for 10 minutes. They were given the questions and time allocated for preparation was 2 minutes. Based on the result, 60% of the students scored C in between 9-12 marks because they occasionally contributed to the discussion. They were able to maintain the discussion. However, they did not use the correct communicative skills while discussing. On the other hand, 40% of the students scored D (5-8) because they were lacking initiative and interest in the discussion and needed prompting for ideas. All of these were due to the lack of communicative skills faced by the students.

Measures Implemented.
　　Based on the findings, the researchers had carried out 3 action plans to improve students' communicative skills. The action plans are:
  (a) Face-to-face class interaction; Students practiced the communication skills through three activities in class; role play, debate and games.
  (b) Dependent WhatsApp Conversations; Lecturer guided the students to write a mini-dialogue using the communicative skills they had learned that day. As they finished preparing the dialogues, they practiced and recorded it using voice notes within their WhatsApp group in class.
  (c) Independent WhatsApp Conversations; Students were required to submit 2 videos per week regarding group discussion via WhatsApp Application. Lecturer acted as facilitator and monitored the students' participation in the discussion.

Step 1:
　　Communicative skills in class were taught using several of activities, not only limited to conventional group discussion layout. The activities included role play, debate and games. Before starting the activities, the first 30 minutes of the lecture was used to explain about the communicative skills lesson. Then, the students were divided into groups of 4 to carry out the activities that helped in practicing their communicative skills. For the role play, students were given situation and they needed to act out for 5 minutes. As for the debate students were given 30 minutes to prepare and 30 minutes to present. The debate was carried out in a group of 3 to 4 whereby they discussed and debated about current issues. Each group was asked to discuss different topics. This would somehow develop students' knowledge in current issues and able to respond using appropriate communicative skills. Last but not least, communicative games were one of the effective methods in practicing communicative skill among the students to encourage creative and spontaneous use of the language. Students enjoyed the communicative games and this could reduce learning anxiety and increase their motivation. All of the elements in social

communication skills must be integrated in these activities. These activities were carried out for 3 hours a week for a month.

Step 2:

Dependent WhatsApp conversation occurs under the lecturer's guidance. The lecturer guided the mini-dialogue and took part in the conversation. The lecturer gave a situation through Whatsapp and the students were required to write a mini-dialogue using the communicative skills they had learnt that day. As they finished writing the dialogue, the lecturer had a quick look for simple correction on the grammatical mistakes. Then they practiced and recorded using voice note in the WhatsApp group. The situation of this conversation was formal because it was guided by the lecturer. This activity only took about 10 minutes before the class ended to recap the communicative skills that they had learned on that day. The other students were encouraged to listen to the dialogues and gave comments. The lecturer also gave feedbacks on the students' comments.

Step 3:

Independent WhatsApp conversation allowed students to communicate among them to discuss ideas they wanted to talk and without lecturer's involvement on the students' online dialogue. During the first two weeks, the students recorded a video of them discussing on free topics to maintain their interpersonal communication. In the video, it was compulsory for the students to use all the communicative skills they had learned in class. After 2 weeks, the lecturer gave a few topics for the students to carry out the group discussion. They needed to submit 2 videos per week via WhatsApp Application to ensure that they had been practicing the skills. The duration of the videos was 2 to 4 minutes. During the recording, students were encouraged to memorize their lines and speak without looking at any text. The other students would comment or give suggestions on the videos. The role of the lecturer was to facilitate the WhatsApp group, motivate the students to actively participate and monitor the members of the group to observe whether they were being active or not. The lecturer was not directly involved in the conversation in order to make them feel free and sundered informal situation. This treatment took 4 weeks in line with the semester 1 syllabus.

Reflection on Research Improvement
Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test

After all the actions planned were carried out, it could be seen that there was improvement in students' ability to use communicative skills in group discussion. This could be seen through the students' post-test result. The Table below showed the difference between pre-test and post-test results.
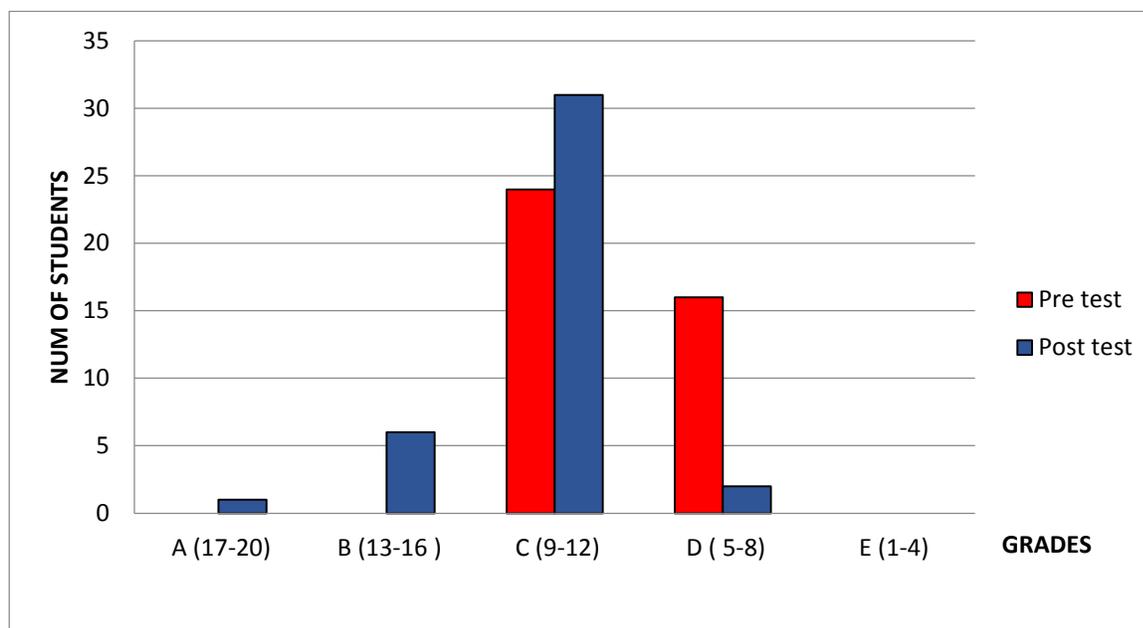
Graph 1: The difference between the pre-test and the post-test

**Table 2:** The difference between the pre-test and the post-test

CRITERIA		PRE-TEST		POST-TEST		STATUS
Grade	Marks	Num of Students	Percentage (%)	Num of Students	Percentage (%)	
A	17-20	0	0%	1	2.5%	INCREASE
B	13-16	0	0%	6	15%	INCREASE
C	9-12	24	60%	31	77.5 %	INCREASE
D	5-8	16	40%	2	5%	DECREASE
E	1-4	0	0%	0	0%	NO CHANGE
Total		40	100%	40	100%	

Table 2 showed the difference between the pre-test and post-test. After all the actions planned were carried out, it could be seen that there was improvement in the post-test result. The result showed the increment in the percentage scored, it proved that students were able to apply the communicative skills better in the post-test after they had gone through several actions planned. 1 student managed to score an A with 17 marks for interactive skills. This student always contributes throughout the discussion and was able to initiate and help to prompt his friends to speak more. 6 students scored B with average result between 13 and 16. They often involved in the discussion and displayed initiative and interest most of the time. They helped to manage and maintain the discussion effectively. Apart from that, the number of students who scored C increased 17.5% from the pre-test and the students who scored D decreased from 16 students to only 2 students in the post-test. This

showed a positive result because more students occasionally contributes to the discussion and able to maintain the discussion now and then.

Questionnaire

A set of questionnaire was given to the students right after they have completed the post-test to support the positive findings of the post-test. The aspects tested were students' interest in learning English subject, their understanding on the communicative skills and their perception on using WhatsApp to learn the skills after undergone all the action planned. The findings can be seen as below.
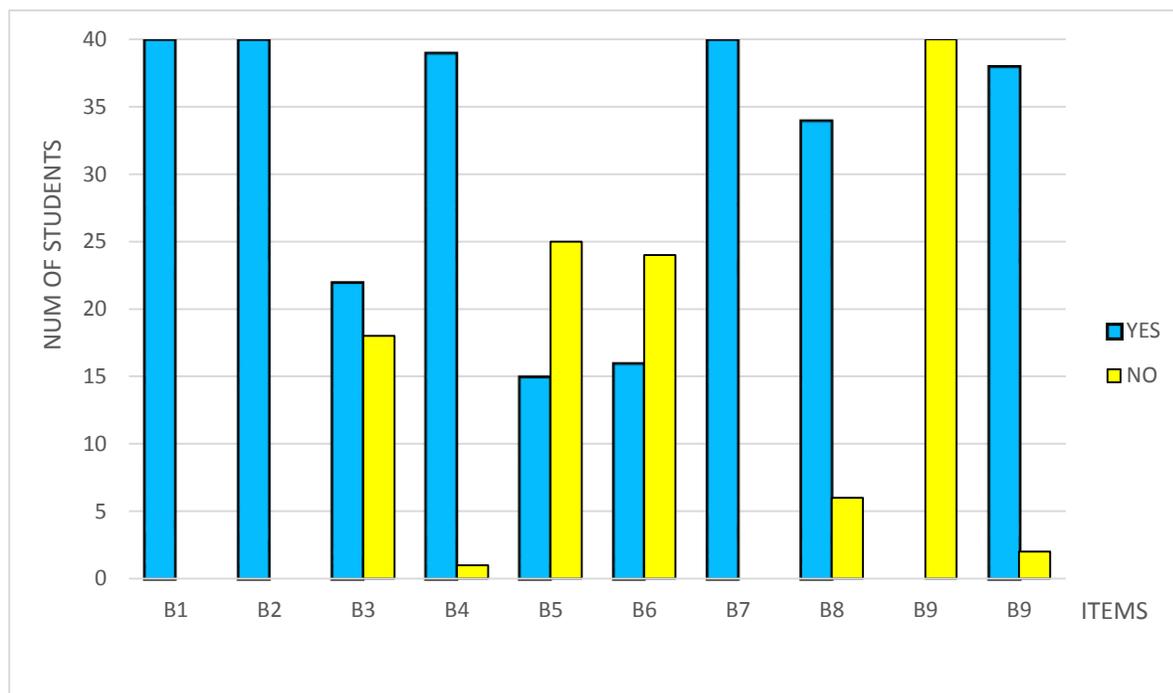
**Graph 2:** Students' Interest in Learning the English Subject.

Table 3 shows the students' interest in learning English subject. There were 10 items agree (B1=100, B2=100, B3=55, B4=97.5, B5=37.5, B6=40, B7=100, B8=85, B9=0, B10=95) percentage and 10 items disagree (B1=0, B2=0, B3=45, B4=2.5, B5=62.5, B6=60, B7=0, B8=15, B9=100, B10=5) percentage.

The analysis showed that 100% students agreed that learning English was important because they will need it for their career.97.5% of the students admitted that they felt enthusiastic whenever they attended English classes (B4). However most of them (62.5%) did not keep up to date with the English lesson every day (B5). This was the reason why most of the students were lacking in communicative skills in the beginning because they did not apply the language outside of the classroom. Apart from that, 55% of the students agreed that they would rather spend more time in the English class compared to the other classes (B3) while another 45% disagreed. These students preferred other

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classes than English probably because they were lacking in the language and felt stressful whenever they had to present or communicate in English. 100% of the students admitted that they really enjoyed attending English class.

Table 3: Students' Interest in Learning English Subject.

NUM	ITEM	YES	%	NO	%
B1	Learning English is important because I will need it for my career.	40	100	0	0
B2	I try to understand all the Group Discussion skills taught in class.	40	100	0	0
B3	I would rather spend more time in English class compared to other classes.	22	55	18	45
B4	I feel enthusiastic whenever I attend English classes.	39	97.5	1	2.5
B5	I keep up to date with the English lesson by doing exercises almost everyday	15	37.5	25	62.5
B6	I would rather spend my time on other subjects rather than English	16	40	24	60
B7	To be honest, I really enjoy attending English class.	40	100	0	0
B8	When I have problem understanding something in class, I always ask my lecturer.	34	85	6	15
B9	I tend to give up and not pay attention when I do not understand my lecturer's explanation of something.	0	0	40	100
B10	I really work hard to learn all the English skills.	38	95	2	5
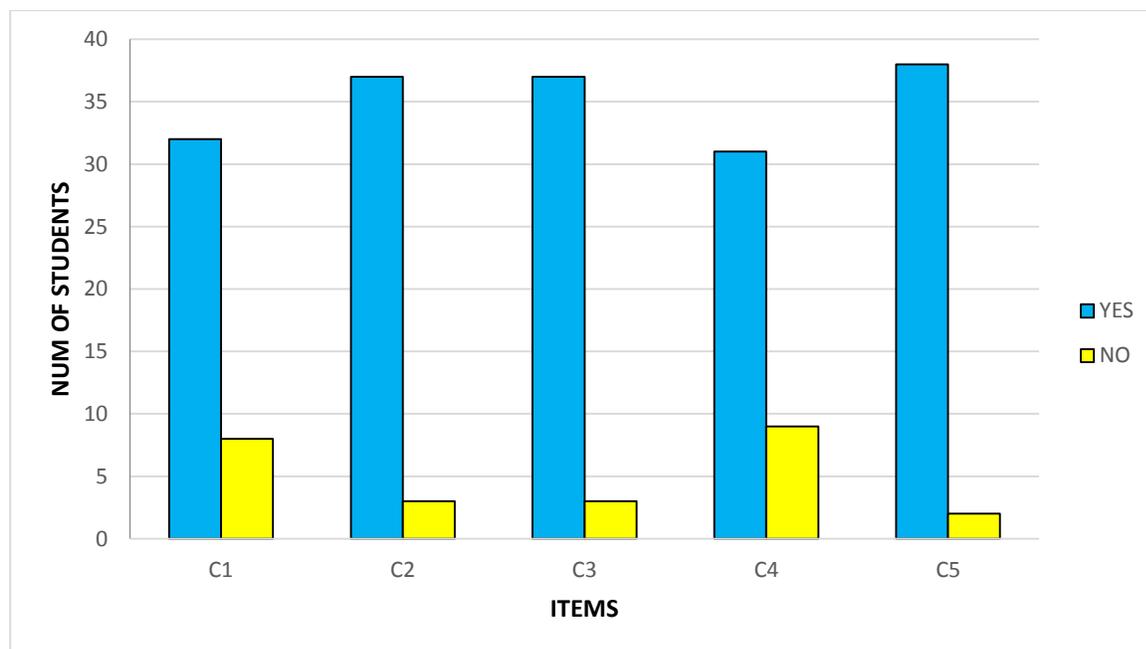
Graph 3: Student's Understanding of The Skills in Group Discussion

Table 4: Student's Understanding of The Skills in Group Discussion

| NUM	ITEM	YES	%	NO	%
C1	I am able to initiate a group discussion	32	80	8	20
C2	I am able to ask for clarification whenever there is misunderstanding.	37	92.5	3	7.5
C3	I am able to interrupt politely in a discussion to give my points.	37	92.5	3	7.5
C4	I am able to justify opinions trough elaborations of main points and supporting details.	31	77.5	9	22.5
C5	I am able to respond to others opinion	38	95	2	5

Table 4 showed students' understanding of the skills in group discussion. There were 5 items agree (C1=80, C2=92.5, C3=92.5, C4=77.5, C5=95) percentage and 5 items disagree (C1=20, C2=7.5, C3=7.5, C4=22.5, C5=5) percentage. The communicative skills that were tested during the pre and post-test are students were able to initiate group discussion, able to make clarifications and interruption during the discussion. Students were also tested on the communicative skills they used to justify their points and respond to others opinions.

The analysis showed that the students were able to understand all the communicative skills and were able to comprehend in the group discussion. 92.5% of the students agreed that they could interrupt politely and ask for clarifications in the group discussion while another 7.5% answered 'No'. 80% of the students were confident enough to initiate the group discussion after undergone all the treatment. 95% of the students stated that they were able to respond to other students' opinion during the discussion.

When asked if the students could justify their opinions through elaborations of main points and supporting details, only 77.5% confidently confessed they could but another 22.5% stated 'No' as the answer. The students need to read and do research on the topic they were discussing to enable them be more confident in justifying their points.

Students' Perception on Improving Communicative Skills Using WhatsApp.

Table 5 showed students' perception on improving communicative skils using WhatsApp. There were 5 items agree (D1=87.5, D2=82.5, D3=90, D4=92.5, D5=87.5) percentage and 5 items disagree ((D1=12.5, D2=17.5, D3=10, D4=7.5, D5=12.5) percentage.

STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE SKILLS IN GROUP DISCUSSION
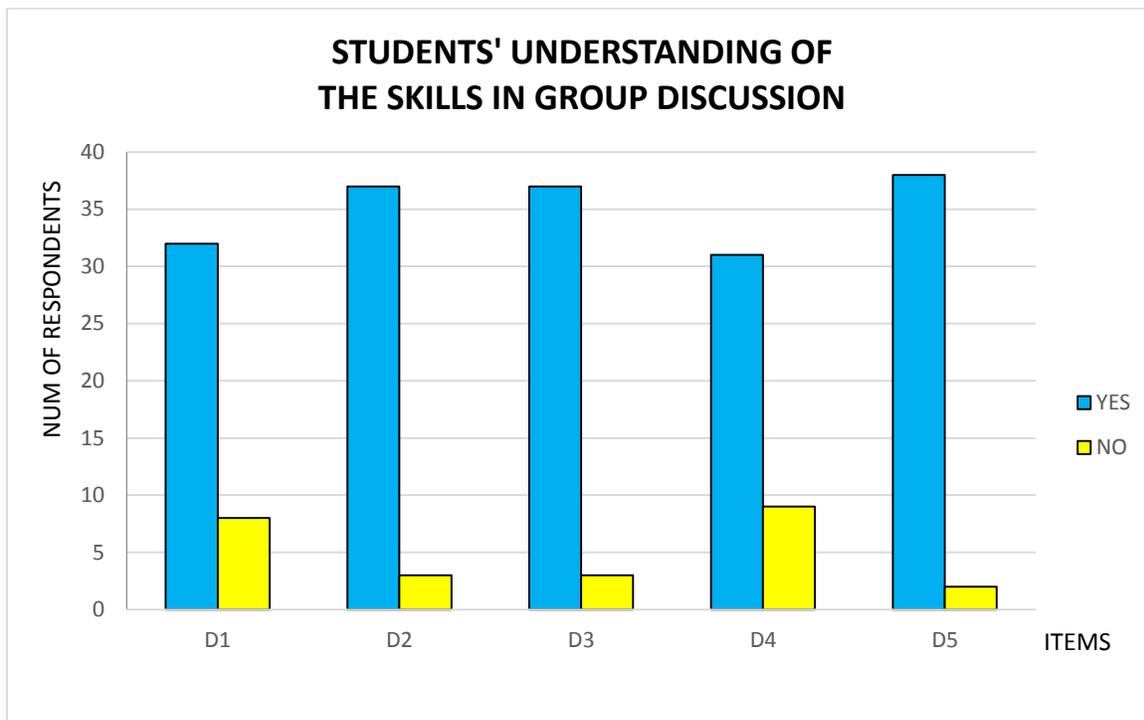
Graph 4: Students' Perception on Improving Communicative Skills Using WhatsApp.

The analysis showed positive feedback of using WhatsApp Application in improving their communicative skills. Hence vast majority of the students (82.5%) agreed that they participated more in the WhatsApp group discussion than they normally do in the classroom to enhance their communicative skills. During the WhatsApp activities, less active students attempted to be active in joining the conversation. Previously, they only read or try to write a comment in words or phrases.

However, a couple of weeks later, they showed great improvements as they were able to give comments verbally with the use of voice notes and videos. 87.5% of the students confirmed that their discussion skills improved after practicing through WhatsApp videos. Students contended that they were not afraid and embarrassed anymore to make any mistakes in pronunciations and sentence structures as they have friends and the lecturer to help them speak. 92.5% of the students preferred the lecturer to use WhatsApp to practice their communicative skills. They were more happy and comfortable using WhatsApp to practice their English and admitted that they had become more confident.

Table 5: Students' Perception on Improving Communicative Skills Using WhatsApp.

NUM	ITEM	YES	%	NO	%
DI	I believe I have improved my communicative skills through the WhatsApp discussion group	35	87.5	5	12.5
D2	I participated more in the WhatsApp group discussion than I normally do in the classroom to enhance my communicative skills.	33	82.5	7	17.5
D3	I enjoy my video group discussion in the WhatsApp group.	36	90	4	10
D4	I prefer the lecturer to use the WhatsApp to practice my communicative skills through group discussion.	37	92.5	3	7.5
D5	I find that my discussion skills improved after practicing through WhatsApp video	35	87.5	5	12.5

Reflection of the Research.

Based on the researcher's experience in teaching Semester 1 students, most of them could not perform well in the group discussion assessment because they were neither interested in learning English, nor having self-confidence to practice using English in class.

During class period, the researcher made sure the explanation and activities were interesting and enjoyable for the students to follow. Demonstration, videos, audio recordings and games were used to support the teaching. The students participated in the class activities such as role-playing, debate and communicative games. These kinds of activities could help arouse students' interest towards the English language and at the same time help improve their result in the subject. Students also were often asked of what kind of activities they liked to have for the next coming lesson. Students' feedbacks on the lesson were important to make them feel more enthusiastic on the lesson.

In this research, WhatsApp Application had provided significant assistance for the students to improve their communicative skills. WhatsApp enabled students to become autonomous learners because they could learn independently. They could practice to use the language without being limited by the time and classroom, either in independent or dependent type of conversation. Voice notes and videos recording had helped a lot in improving students' communicative skills as they had to memorize and practice several times before recording. This could allow the students to access the learning at their own pace with instant playback, rewind, pause and edit. The process on getting the best recording was what matters. After several times of rehearsing and recording, they would get comfortable and confident with the language and were able to speak better. This subconscious process gave a wide chance for them to learn and practice using the target language naturally.

Suggestions and Recommendation

There are a few action researchers suggested that could be conducted as the follow up to this research.

1. Lecturer should focus on the students' basic skills in the communicative skills. For example, learning vocabularies and building simple structures
2. The introduction of WhatsApp Application can further be exploited in other skills such as reading and writing. Besides that students can also be exposed to other online tools that are available on the internet. Students tend to be motivated towards foreign language learning using mobile technologies
3. Create a variety of communicative activities that are related to the students' daily life. Students should be provided with an effective platform to familiarize them with the language that will help them to be more comfortable in using English for communication.

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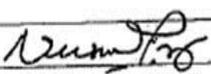
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13.0 APPENDIX

13.1 Group Discussion Rubrics

DUE 1012 GROUP DISCUSSION RUBRICS – 20%

CRITERIA	17-20	13-16	9-12	5-8	1-4	MARKS
LANGUAGE (I)	• Hardly any grammatical errors. • Correct usage of language forms and functions throughout the discussion. • No problems in pronunciation except for occasional slips. • Uses appropriate and varied vocabulary effectively throughout the discussion.	• Few grammatical errors. • Correct usage of language forms and functions most of the time. • Problems in pronunciation but do not hinder comprehension. • Uses appropriate and varied vocabulary effectively most of the time.	• Some grammatical errors. • Correct usage of language forms and functions now and then. • Problems in pronunciation occasionally lead to incomprehension. • Uses appropriate and varied vocabulary effectively now and then.	• Many grammatical errors. • Poor usage of language forms and functions. • Problems in pronunciation frequently lead to incomprehension. • Limited use of appropriate and varied vocabulary.	• Gross grammatical errors. • Inappropriate usage of language forms and functions. • Problems in pronunciation lead to incomprehension. • Unable to use appropriate and varied vocabulary.	/20
INTERACTIVE SKILLS (ii)	• Always contributes to the discussion. • Manages and maintains discussion very effectively and confidently throughout the discussion. • Displays initiative and interest very clearly throughout the discussion.	• Often contributes to the discussion. • Manages and maintains discussion effectively and confidently most of the time. • Displays initiative and interest clearly in the discussion most of the time.	• Occasionally contributes to the discussion. • Able to maintain discussion now and then. • Displays initiative and interest in the discussion now and then.	• Rarely contributes to the discussion. • Tries to maintain discussion and needs prompting. • Lacks initiative and interest in the discussion.	• Hardly contributes to the discussion. • Hardly able to maintain discussion. • Does not have initiative nor interest in the discussion.	/20
CONTENT (iii)	• Shows very good understanding of the topic by giving three relevant, well supported points. • Organises ideas very well throughout the discussion. • Responds to task appropriately throughout the discussion.	• Shows good understanding of the topic by giving at least two relevant well supported points. • Organises ideas well most of the time. • Responds to task appropriately most of the time.	• Shows satisfactory understanding of the topic by giving at least one relevant well supported point. • Organises ideas well now and then. • Responds to task appropriately now and then.	• Able to state two to three relevant points without supporting details. • Organises ideas with effort. • Limited response to the task.	• Able to state only one relevant point without supporting details. • Struggles to organise ideas. • Irrelevant response to the task.	/20
					I + II + III = Total	/60
					(__ / 60 x 100) x 20%	=

Topic : _____

Programme : _____

NO.	NAME	REG.NO.	LANGUAGE	INTERACTIVE SKILLS	CONTENT	TOTAL (__/ 60 x 100) x 20%

NORSALIZA BT. OSMAN
Ketua Kursus Bahasa Inggeris
Jabatan Pengajian Am
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