


Learners' perceptions about the use of *WhatsApp* for the development of oral production in english as an L2

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of learners about the use of *WhatsApp* as a tool for oral production in English as L2. To this end, forty-six volunteer students from Informatics, Agroindustry and Agriculture courses took part in the research. Data were generated through the application of a questionnaire, composed of two Likert scale questions and one open question. The results indicate that the participants understand that the use of *WhatsApp* benefited their oral productions in L2 and that the instrument should be adopted in English classes. Positive and negative points of the pedagogical intervention were also exposed. We believe that this study is relevant, since it deals with students' perceptions about the use of the *WhatsApp* tool, which can guarantee democratic access to digital technologies, contributing to a more egalitarian society.

Keywords: Oral production, Learning English as L2, *WhatsApp*.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not necessary to have a sociological analysis of Brazilian society to see that, as in many other countries, the introduction of *smartphones* has revolutionized contemporary life. Whether for interaction on social networks, carrying out banking transactions or for accessing information, it is undeniable that this technology has become indispensable.

According to the report by the National Telecommunications Agency (Anatel), in 2020 Brazil reached the mark of 234 million mobile accesses, a category that refers to cell phone chips used for voice or internet connection. This data also represents an increase of 3.26% compared to 2019, which corresponds to an increase of 7.39 million new accesses in absolute numbers.

This continuous growth in the use of *smartphones* has stimulated researchers to investigate the possibilities of using these devices in teaching-learning environments. With regard to foreign languages, teachers and researchers have directed their attention to the impact of using this digital tool. According to Costa (2013), the use of cell phones in English language teaching motivates learners, inserting them in an authentic learning context and improving their skills in the language studied.

Thus, the incorporation of *Smartphones* as a pedagogical tool can also optimize the time dedicated to the teaching-learning process, allowing immediate and online access to relevant information, in addition to making the time and space allocated to learning more flexible, enabling it at different times and places, diverging from the traditional teaching model³.

WhatsApp is one of the most popular messaging apps in the world, and its use has been growing steadily in recent years. According to the official website of the said app, as of January 2021, it has reached two billion monthly active users worldwide. In Brazil, the situation is no different, the app is widely used and in January 2021, the country recorded 120 million monthly active users on *WhatsApp*.

Additionally, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the use of the app for personal and professional communication, which has further contributed to the increase in the number of users. *WhatsApp* has become an essential tool for many people and businesses around the world, allowing them to connect and communicate instantly, without geographical barriers.

WhatsApp is a tool that has been increasingly used in education, as a way to complement school activities and also to establish more direct communication between students and teachers. One of the main advantages of this tool is its ability to connect people instantly and efficiently, regardless of geographic location. According to Andretta, Bernardi and Cordenonsi (2019), the *WhatsApp*

³ Traditional education here can be characterized as "banking education", defined by Paulo Freire (1998) as that in which the teacher is the holder of knowledge and will narrate his knowledge to the students, who know nothing.



application has been inserted and used in the school environment in various ways and contexts, revealing several functionalities to be explored in the educational environment.

As English teachers, we are always looking for ways to help our students improve their L2 skills. During our teaching career, we have understood that fluent oral production is one of the main desires of students, evidenced by the frequently asked question "*Do you speak English?*". In view of the growing use of *smartphones* for educational purposes and the wide acceptance of the *WhatsApp* application in our country, including for pedagogical activities, our objective is to investigate the perceptions of learners about the use of *WhatsApp* as a tool for oral production.

To try to achieve this goal, we intend to answer the following research question: What are the perceptions of learners in relation to the use of *the WhatsApp* application for the development of oral production in English as L2?

In the following sections, we present a brief literature review, the research methodology reported in this article, its results, and discussion.

RELEVANCE OF FLUENCY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF L2 SPEAKING PRODUCTION

The ability to speak is, without a doubt, one of the most complex of human beings. According to Levelt (1989), this ability cannot be performed without a cognitive process that allows its understanding. In other words, to produce a fluent speech requires prior planning, which includes the proper selection of words and their articulation. In addition, the speaker's oral production is constantly developing, with the introduction of new words into the language and the expansion of the speaker's vocabulary. Consequently, for Levelt (1989), the speaker should be considered a highly complex information processor.

On the other hand, the role of oral production in L2 learning has been considerably modified since Swain's (1985) research, no longer being considered a mere practice of already existing knowledge (KRASHEN, 1985), and being understood as an independent aspect of learning. According to Swain (1985), learners with oral and written comprehension skills equivalent to those of a native speaker generally do not achieve the same proficiency in production, which leads them to conclude that the processes involved in the production of a language are different from those involved in its comprehension.

In his theorization about linguistic production, Swain (1985) argues that, at the moment of language production, both in the oral and written modalities, the learner focuses on the possible forms used to express the message and, at that moment, observes the gaps in his or her developing system and seeks to fill them. According to Swain (1993, 1995), there are four functions performed by oral production in the learning process of an L2: the function of language practice (fluency and



automaticity); the trigger function (or the role of promoting cognitive recording); the function of testing hypotheses about structures and meanings; and the metalinguistic (or reflective role) function.

In other words, at the time of L2 production, learners identify a gap between what they intend to say and what they can actually say. As soon as they perceive the imperfections in their speech, the learners turn to their *input in* order to seek the solution to the problem, an action that provides a cycle between *input* and *output* (SWAIN, 1993). Thus, by promoting cognitive registration, the learner can, on the one hand, generate new linguistic knowledge and, on the other hand, consolidate existing knowledge (SWAIN, 1993; SWAIN; LAPKIN, 1995).

It is correct to state that the learner, to perform a quality oral production, must be aware of certain micro speech skills. As recommended by Skehan (1996), the level of oral proficiency of an L2 speaker can be assessed considering three dimensions: grammatical accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Similarly, for Ellis (2009), a proficient learner is one who, using a complex language, can perform grammatically correct tasks fluently.

As pointed out by Skehan (1996) and Ellis (2009), during oral production, speakers need to distribute their attention among three fundamental dimensions. These dimensions are grammatical accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Due to the *trade-off* effect, however, it is impossible to prioritize all three dimensions simultaneously. As the learner focuses more attentional resources on a particular aspect, the others (or at least one of them) are negatively impaired. In this way, the speaker seeks to balance the deficiencies in one aspect, focusing on another.

Focused on the objectives of this work, we will highlight only fluency. For Ellis (2009), fluency is the ability to use language in real time, using more lexicalized systems, to emphasize meanings. In other words, in a fluent production, the speaker would communicate with a reduced number of pauses, hesitations, or repetitions, thus allowing for a better understanding of the message.

According to Skehan and Foster (1996), fluency is achieved when the speaker, when performing oral production in L2, uses his implicit knowledge in an authentic way. In this sense, in order for fluent communication to occur, redundancy, pause, prolonged silence and constant repetition are considered, in an inversely proportional way, among other factors.

The condition in which the speaker presents insufficient levels of fluency causes, on the one hand, difficulties in interacting with interlocutors and, on the other hand, frustration in the face of the realization that the learner is not able to express his ideas satisfactorily. According to Skehan (1996), it is common for the speaker to prioritize other aspects to the detriment of fluency, such as grammatical accuracy, since he has not yet mastered a repertoire of automated expressions in his L2, which are essential for real-time communication.



THE USE OF *WHATSAPP* AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Research on the role of mobile digital technology, and especially *WhatsApp*, in learning has become increasingly frequent (HAN, KESKIN, 2016; WEISSHEIMER, CALDAS, MARQUES, 2018) and feedback on oral production (WEISSHEIMER, CALDAS, 2021). These studies reinforce the conception that the learner, when producing texts, audios, images and videos, engages in reflection and self-correction in a systematic way, factors that can contribute substantially to learning. The fact that students edit their *output* can help them improve their speaking output (SWAIN; LAPKIN, 1995).

Gomes (2013) investigated, based on the perception of teachers, positive aspects resulting from the use of *WhatsApp* in the classroom. Among the most important aspects are the approximation between formal and informal learning; improvement of continuous learning; optimization of classroom time; possibility of learning at any time and place; Improved communication and the possibility of immediate evaluation and *feedback*.

According to Ramble and Chipunza (2013), the incorporation of the *WhatsApp* application in pedagogical activities implies greater student involvement and provides a new means of communication between the teacher and the learners. However, these researchers identified a disadvantage of using the app in the classroom. In the case of adult students, the asynchronous use of *WhatsApp* after classes can associate academic life with the family sphere, generating a negative impact on family relationships.

Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) researched the advantages of using *WhatsApp* in classrooms and categorized their findings in a tripartite way: Technical advantages: easy handling, availability, and immediacy; Educational advantages: encouragement of collaboration and feeling of comfort in relation to the other; Academic Perks: Access to learning materials after class hours.

For Mattar (2014), it is the multiple features of the application that strengthen the use of *WhatsApp* in educational environments, as this application makes it possible to send texts, audios, images and videos. The author highlights the growing interest of foreign language teachers, for whom the tool would prove to be an interesting possibility for the development of the language.

Weissheimer, Caldas, and Marques (2018) conducted a study in which, through the use of *WhatsApp*, learners recorded short oral productions, which would be the object of *feedback* by the teacher. According to the results of this study, *WhatsApp* not only positively affected the development of students' orality (with regard to grammatical accuracy), but also, in the opinion of learners, it was considered a positive tool in the context of language teaching and learning.

Weissheimer and Caldas (2021) investigated whether the different types of feedback mediated by *WhatsApp* impacted the participants' oral production, in terms of grammatical accuracy, weighted lexical density, and fluency. For the authors, explicit feedback was more effective specifically with



regard to the development of learners' grammatical accuracy, although there were no significant differences between the two types of feedback and the development of lexical density or fluency.

Then, we deal in a more specific and detailed way with the methodological aspects of the research, highlighting the context of the participants, the instruments and procedures of data collection and analysis, and then we present the results and discussions.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of the research reported here was to investigate the perceptions of learners about the use of *WhatsApp* as a tool for oral production in English as L2. To achieve this goal, we implemented the following methodological design.

CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

The present research was carried out at the Agricultural School of Jundiaí/UFRN, with the participation of volunteer students belonging to four classes of the third year of technical education integrated to the high school of this Institution, in the areas of Agroindustry, Agriculture, Aquaculture and Informatics. It is important to note that students at this school attend English language classes twice a week, lasting an hour and a half per meeting. The age range of the participants ranged from 17 to 19 years, with a mean age of 18 years. Of the total of 117 students, 52 volunteered to participate in the research, but only 46 responded to the instruments used during the study. The use of *WhatsApp* as a pedagogical tool for teaching English took place from March to October 2022 and data collection was carried out on November 7 of the same year. The study was part of the postdoctoral internship of one of the researchers involved in the project.

In order to ensure greater control over the variables, data collection was carried out with the researcher's students in their own institution, in order to standardize the materials and methods used in the different classes. In addition, due to the nature of the proposed tasks, it was essential to maintain frequent contact with the students, providing guidance and encouragement.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (Opinion 5.276.636) and all volunteer participants signed a consent and assent form, authorizing the recording of their voices and participation in the research.

During a period of eight months, between March and October 2022, students were encouraged to produce eight audios in English, addressing topics previously proposed by the teacher/researcher. Then, they were instructed to send their oral productions to the teacher's WhatsApp. The suggested themes involved personal aspects of the students, such as: personal



presentation, preferences and dislikes, family context, daily routine, relationship with classmates and teachers, description of the city where they live, sports practice and personal aspirations. The median interval between messages was 24 days. The *feedback* offered by the teacher/researcher occurred through the *WhatsApp* application and focused on positive aspects of the participants' oral productions, considering their fluency.

After the period of carrying out the didactic activities with the use of *WhatsApp*, the participants answered a questionnaire whose objective was to verify the students' opinions about the experience of using the application in English classes. The questions in the questionnaire were simple and direct so that they revealed the students' opinion as truthfully as possible.

Thus, the learners answered a questionnaire consisting of two closed questions using the Likert scale, in which they had to choose only one answer, and one open answer, to be answered in writing. The analysis of the quantitative data generated by the Likert scale was done through graphs. In turn, the qualitative data were analyzed using the *WordClouds tool*.

According to Dörnyei (2007), quantitative research is characterized by comprising samples of numerical information and the use of statistical instruments. On the other hand, according to the aforementioned author, qualitative research uses data collection techniques that generate non-numerical information. In other words, data refer to the essence of people, objects, or situations and focus on the description, understanding, and explanation of human experiences, and are not analyzed through statistical methods (SOUZA, 2014).

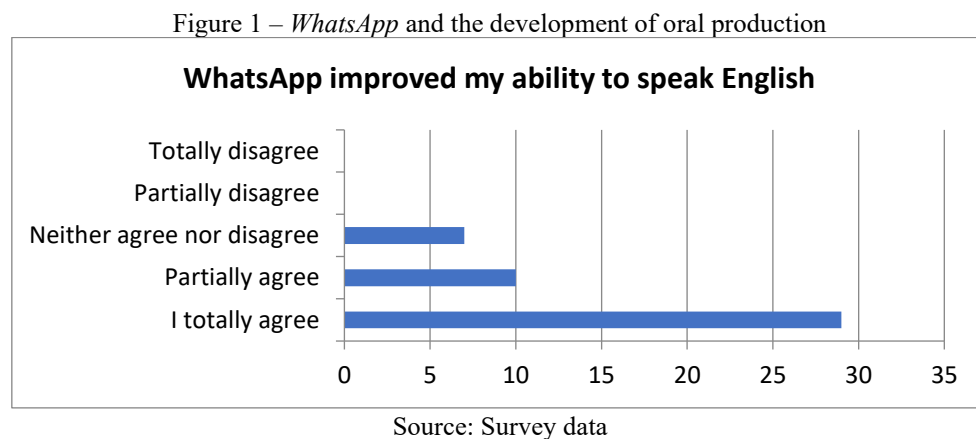
Thus, both quantitative (closed questions on a Likert scale) and qualitative (open question) data were collected and analyzed. According to Dörnyei (2007), this mixed approach confers greater reliability in the analysis and interpretation of data, as it can produce evidence for the validity of the results of the investigation, through their convergence and verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Next, we present the results and discussions of the present study, which sought to investigate the perceptions of learners in relation to the use of *the WhatsApp* application for the development of oral production in English as L2. Initially, quantitative data collected through the Likert scale will be presented, which provide an overview of the participants' responses and allow the quantification of their opinions. Subsequently, we focus on the analysis of qualitative data, obtained through open-ended questions, which enable a deeper understanding of the subjective aspects and individual nuances of the participants' experiences

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA FROM THE OPEN QUESTIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

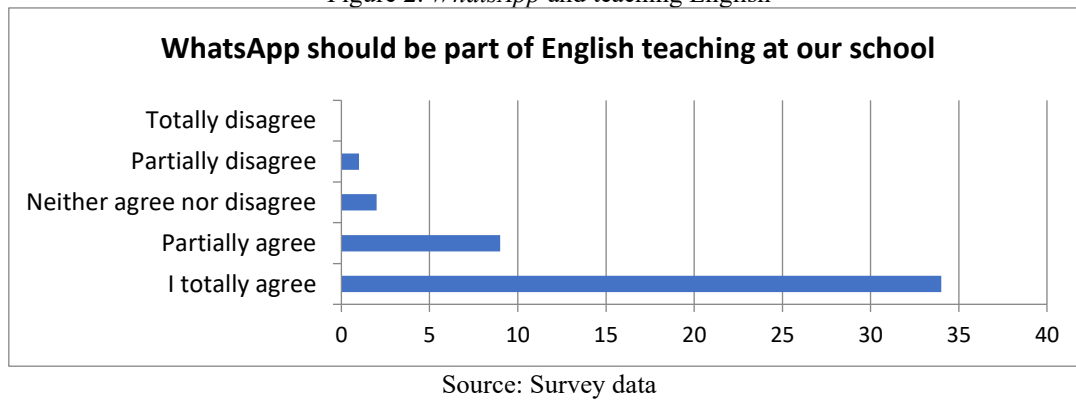
With regard to the first statement of the Likert scale – *WhatsApp* improved my ability to speak English – twenty-nine participants strongly agreed, ten participants partially agreed, seven participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and no participant disagreed, either partially or completely, as shown in the graph in Figure 1.



According to the theoretical foundations of this research, a learner can develop a satisfactory understanding of a second language without their focus being on production. However, according to Swain (1995), it is only in production that the learner tests hypotheses and, consequently, becomes capable of perceiving what he can or cannot express. It is true that oral production requires a greater effort from the learner, who becomes the protagonist of his learning. This effort results in a greater effectiveness of the development of oral production. Thus, according to the learners' perceptions, our study, through the pedagogical intervention carried out, may have contributed to the oral development of the participants, especially if we observe the answers obtained in this question.

Regarding the second statement of the Likert scale – *WhatsApp* should be part of the teaching of English in our school – thirty-four participants strongly agreed, nine participants partially agreed, two participants neither agreed nor disagreed, one participant partially disagreed, and no participant strongly disagreed. In other words, despite the disagreement, it is possible to conclude that, for the participants, the insertion of *WhatsApp* as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of English would be positive, as shown in the graph presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: *WhatsApp* and teaching English



Although the use of *WhatsApp* as a tool to improve oral production is not yet widely used in schools, studies have indicated that this application contributes to maximizing time in the classroom, enables learning at any time and place, and improves communication and continuous learning (GOMES, 2013). For Weissheimer, Caldas, Marques (2018), not only the results of the research demonstrated the effectiveness of using *WhatsApp* in the development of learners' oral production, but also the positive opinion of these students reinforces the benefits of using this application for this specific purpose.

It is significant that most of the students expressed interest in continuing the experience, as this represents an additional aid for learning a second language, especially due to the three major advantages brought by *M-Learning*: autonomy, mobility, and flexibility (OLIVEIRA, 2014). Autonomy is granted to the student, who can organize his or her own study. Mobility makes it possible for learning to take place in any environment, not just in the classroom. And the flexibility allows teachers and students to interact outside of regular hours.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA FROM THE OPEN QUESTIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In the open-ended question of the questionnaire, the students listed a positive and a negative point in relation to the use of *WhatsApp* in the activities. These data were analyzed using the *WordClouds* tool. The first word cloud, presented in Figure 3, represents the positive points listed by the students; the second, in Figure 4, the negative points.

Figure 3: Positive aspects of *WhatsApp*



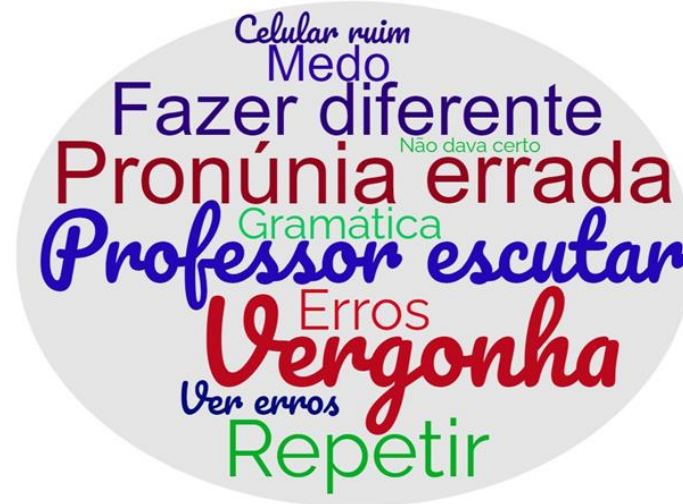
Source: Prepared by the author

One of the most appreciated benefits by students regarding the use of the *WhatsApp application* is the opportunity to practice speaking and language. In addition, another positive aspect that deserves to be highlighted is the importance of this practice to help them overcome the fear of expressing themselves verbally, which, in turn, contributes to developing confidence in this skill, as we can see in the highlighted excerpts:

- Q11– I thought it was cool because I realized that I can already speak in English a little.
- P13 – Only then did I have the courage to speak English.
- P33 - I spent some time thinking about how I was going to speak, but it worked, what mattered was to speak.
- Q37–I ended up practicing the content of the room and speaking.
- P41 – I was very afraid of speaking wrong in the room and this is how I succeeded.
- P44–We had never practiced speaking so much in English classes.

It is widely recognized that oral production is a crucial factor in improving one's ability to speak a language. It is only through the production itself that the student will be able to identify and correct their gaps (SCHMIDT, 1990; SWAIN, 1995). Thus, considering that one of the main objectives of second language students is to develop the ability to communicate, activities that stimulate speech, such as those developed, are fundamental for learning an L2. Despite these positive points, the participants also revealed negative points, as we see in the word cloud presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Negative aspects of *WhatsApp*



Source: Prepared by the author

Some participants responded that each time they listened to their own audios, they noticed new errors. Others said they were embarrassed to send the audios to the teacher, for fear that they would have too many errors, both in grammar and pronunciation. We illustrate these negative points with the following excerpts from the participants' answers:

- Q6 – Every time I recorded I found a new error.
- Q17 – My audios were full of errors and I was afraid to send them, but I sent them anyway.
- Q19 – I was very embarrassed and afraid to send the audios.
- P26 - I was very scared because I knew that the teacher would listen to the audios and see my mistakes.
- Q33–I was very, very afraid of making mistakes.
- P39 – I was very embarrassed to send the audios, even though I knew it was only the teacher who was going to listen.

As much as the participants listed these factors as negative, it is possible to argue, according to our theoretical framework, that, when they perceive their own mistakes, the learners are, in fact, evolving in their oral productions precisely by virtue of this cognitive register. This argument is supported not only by the *Noticing Hypothesis*, proposed by Schmidt (1990), according to which learners need to consciously register the linguistic aspects of L2 in order to acquire them, but also in Swain's (1995) theorizing, according to which it is by producing the language that students will trigger *noticing*, perceiving what is missing in their production and how to improve it.

Our understanding is that the feeling of shame experienced by the learners was mainly due to the fact that this activity represented uncharted territory for them, as they had never had similar experiences before. We did not believe that the shame was related to the oral production itself, since the performance of the activity at home and the time available to plan it contributed to increase the confidence of the L2 speakers.



Regarding the fear of making mistakes, we reiterate the argument that this fear is intrinsically linked to the complexity inherent in the oral development of a language, especially a second language. We understand that planning and training are essential steps for the learner to stop seeing the mistake as a failure and start to see it as a necessary part of the learning process.

In general, the results obtained were very positive, allowing us to affirm that, with their answers, the participants exposed pedagogical benefits arising from the pedagogical intervention. Thus, our results suggest that continuous and systematized interventions, such as those implemented in this study, can contribute positively to the development of learners' fluency. In other words, the more opportunities are created for students to practice speaking, the greater the chances of improving their fluency levels in the language in question.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The present study aimed to investigate the perceptions of learners in relation to the use of *the WhatsApp* application for the development of oral production in English as L2. In the period prior to the application of a questionnaire in which they would express their opinions, forty-six students performed eight oral production tasks (audios) and, subsequently, sent these productions to the researcher through the *WhatsApp* application for eight months (March to October 2022).

After this period of carrying out the didactic activities with the use of *WhatsApp*, the participants answered a questionnaire whose objective was to verify their opinions about the experience of using the application in English classes.

The results of our research indicate that the students considered the use of *WhatsApp* as a tool to practice oral skills as positive, stated that they had improved their oral productions and expressed the desire for similar interventions to be more frequent.

These results tend to strengthen the theories presented here, especially when we consider that the planning prior to the recording of the audios and the various attempts at recording inevitably lead the learner to a reflection both on the selection of vocabulary and on the best way to articulate it, which, in the long run, can be reflected in an improvement of their oral production.

In addition, register during the Covid-19 pandemic, *WhatsApp* played a key role for didactic purposes and proved to be a powerful tool for remote teaching. With school closures and the need for social distancing, educators quickly adapted their pedagogical practices to the virtual environment, and *WhatsApp* emerged as an accessible and widely adopted alternative. Resources such as audios, videos and shared documents made it possible to diversify teaching strategies, stimulating student engagement. In this way, *WhatsApp* has demonstrated its potential as a versatile and easily accessible platform, which has contributed significantly to the continuity of education in a period of great challenges.



Although promising, the results of this study should be considered in conjunction with some limitations. Firstly, the number of participants (46) is not sufficient to allow generalizations from such a narrow data set. In addition, the introduction of a new factor (the use of *WhatsApp*) in the classroom raises questions about whether the same results could be obtained with other initiatives that promote oral production, such as a conversation group. Thus, students' perceptions may have been positive simply by introducing a new factor, which went beyond traditional classes. Therefore, the results presented here should be perceived as suggestive rather than conclusive.

As a measure to overcome the limitations presented, it is suggested that a larger number of participants can be recruited to obtain more accurate results with regard to quantitative analyses. In addition, an experiment could be carried out, with the division of the participants into two groups, one for treatment and the other for control, in which some would use *WhatsApp* and others would perform the oral production tasks in person, in a conversation group, for example, for comparison purposes.

Despite the limitations presented, we believe that the present study brings important contributions to the teaching and learning of English as L2. In the reality of Brazilian public schools, students generally do not develop oral skills, restricting their studies to reading texts. Therefore, any effort to improve the oral production of learners should be valued, with the aim of preparing them in a fair and equal way for the real world, where communication in English is increasingly necessary.

We advocate for education that allows all students to have access to learning opportunities. In the globalized world we live in, the English language and, in particular, oral proficiency in that language, can open doors. We hope that studies like this can bring more scientific evidence, highlighting the potential of *WhatsApp* as a pedagogical tool, encouraging teachers to consider its use and researchers to replicate its results in different contexts.

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