

## IMPROVING EFL FRESHMEN'S ORAL PROFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY OF THE USE OF WHATSAPP

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**Abstract :** This research work examines the effectiveness of the WhatsApp for the improvement of students' speaking skill. We carried out an investigation on students' speaking proficiency among freshmen at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Brazzaville. To come up with reliable results, we used the action research approach, which consists in identifying students' difficulties and use remedial teaching materials and techniques. Besides, we used four (04) instruments for data collection: (1) questionnaires; (2) classroom observation with a checklist and a dictaphone; (3) tests; (04) mobile phone. We also used Excel to analyze statistical data. The major findings reveal that the use of WhatsApp groups helped students have more space and time for learning and improve their speaking skills through audio files and videos shared.

**Keywords:** EFL freshmen, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), oral proficiency, techno-pedagogy, WhatsApp.

## COMMENT AMÉLIORER L'EXPRESSION ORALE DES ÉTUDIANTS DE PREMIÈRE ANNÉE D'ANGLAIS COMME LANGUE ÉTRANGÈRE PAR L'USAGE DE L'APPLICATION WHATSAPP

**Résumé :** Ce présent travail examine l'effectivité de l'application WhatsApp dans le développement des compétences orales des étudiants. Nous avons mené une enquête sur l'expression orale des étudiants de langue anglaise. Pour obtenir des résultats fiables, nous avons utilisé l'approche recherche action qui consiste à identifier les difficultés des étudiants et d'utiliser des techniques et matériel correctifs. Pour la collecte des données, nous avons eu recours à quatre (4) outils : (1) le questionnaire ; (2) l'observation des classes avec une grille d'observation et un dictaphone ; (3) les tests et (4) le téléphone mobile. En sus, nous avons utilisé Excel pour analyser les données statistiques. Les principales conclusions ont révélé que l'intégration des groupes WhatsApp dans le processus d'apprentissage donne aux étudiants plus d'espace d'apprentissage et les aide à améliorer leur expression orale au travers des audio et vidéos de cours partagés dans les groupes.

**Mots clés :** application WhatsApp, compétence orale, étudiants de première année d'anglais comme langue étrangère, Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication (TIC), techno-pédagogie.

## Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are innovations of great necessity of the twenty-first century. They refer to technological tools and resources that promote new models of teaching and learning in every area of knowledge. At Marien Ngouabi University, particularly at Ecole Normale Supérieure, a teachers' training college, the teaching of the English language is the core of training in the Department of English language. Student-teachers are supposed to communicate fluently in real-life situations. Unfortunately, some student-teachers still have problem expressing themselves at the end of their training.

During the academic year 2021-2022, we were in charge of communicative skills courses in grade 1. Along the first semester, we found that students had problem expressing themselves in English. There were linguistic interferences in their speech. They mispronounced words and did not respect grammar and syntax structures. Considering this situation, we undertook to use Information and Communication Technologies tools, namely the mobile phone to work on students' speaking proficiency through WhatsApp. We stated our research question as follows: To what extent can WhatsApp enhance students' speaking proficiency? Our research hypotheses are: 1). The implementation of WhatsApp groups provides more space for learning and teachers can use audio files and videos to stir up students' interests and engagement; 2). Students might improve their speaking proficiency through audio files and videos shared in groups. They can listen to or watch the material at any moment and interact with peers and the teacher on difficult points. The time is not limited as in the classroom.

Besides, our work has general and specific research objectives:

- 1) General objective: this study examines the impact of the use of WhatsApp for developing students' speaking ability.
- 2) Specific objectives: a). Provide teachers with the techno-pedagogy model to raise students' motivation and interests; b). Help students develop their speaking ability.

The remaining structure of this paper consists of the review of the literature, research methodology, major findings, and the conclusion.

### 1. Review of the related literature

Considering the impact of mobile devices in language teaching, some researchers find it important to use them to teach speaking. We came across with some works dealing with the use of WhatsApp to enhance students' oral proficiency.

Janaina Weissheimer, Vaneska Caldas, Fábio Marques (2018) conducted an experimental study on the effectiveness of the use of WhatsApp to develop students' accuracy in oral production. The number of participants were twenty-seven students whose ages varied from 23 to 37. Researchers transcribed the pre and post-tests audios. The pre-test allowed them to set up two groups, the control and experimental groups. The experimental group was slightly lower than the control one in terms of class average. The experimental group consisted of nine (9) women and five men (5); whereas the control group had ten (10) women and three (03) men. They all had smartphones. Basing on Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Theory, we state that learners need consciously register L2 linguistic aspects to acquire them,

researchers encouraged students from experimental group to record four small audios, through WhatsApp, about pre-established themes. This lasted two months. Students recorded audio files of their convenience and asked questions concerning their doubts about the production of audios. In addition, they rehearsed their speech. After the experimentation, both groups were submitted to a post-test, in which their oral production was assessed. The experimental group received grammar-based feedback, on their grammatical accuracy. However, the control group received content-based feedback, concerning the meaning of the message. The tests consisted of the description of a picture, for at least a minute. Such an activity is based on the third part of the speaking assessment of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET). PET has been chosen because it is an elementary level test, suitable to the level of the participants of our research. Following the measure used by Mehnert (1998) the transcriptions were analyzed by counting the number of errors per one hundred (100) words to measure students' overall accuracy and to determine the impact of the two kinds of feedback.

Results showed that students made fewer mistakes in their post-tests as compared to their pre-tests. They had much time to plan their speaking and to record their audios freely. It seems that students were indeed able to trigger *noticing* and to shift from the semantic process, which prevails in comprehension, to the syntactic one, essential to the production of a language (SWAIN, 1995). Therefore, Weissheimer, Caldas, Marques (2018:23) wrote: " nowadays communication between teachers and students through WhatsApp is quite common and works for several different purposes, such as to solve doubts, to receive feedback, to fill in possible gaps from face-to-face meetings and to encourage students to feel more confident to share their productions."

Approaching the issue of the implementation of ICTs in education realm, namely mobile phone, Mohammed Adulkareem A. Alkamel and Santosh S. Chouthaiwale (2018: 32) assert:

learners can search for new words using dictionary option in the mobile phones and enrich their vocabulary. They may verify the spelling, pronunciation and usage of the specific word they searched for. Moreover, they can use Short Message Service (SMS) to send queries to their instructors and get their doubts cleared.

The above quotation shows that the ICTs tool, the mobile phone, develops students' learning autonomy, the teacher remains a guide. It provides wider learning space and much time with the possibility to review the previous lessons at any time.

Apart from positive results, Yilmazoy, Kahraman and Baysan (2019) point out some negative aspects which can hinder language teaching through WhatsApp such as, internet-based technical problems, high number of big-sized video files. Another fact is that students do not pay attention to grammar rules, use abbreviations in writing tasks, and plagiarize materials.

## 2. Research Methodology

This paper uses the action research model, which is a process of studying a real classroom situation to understand it and improve the quality of instruction (Johnson, 2012). Otherwise, it consists in taking a critical look at classroom practices and, after in-depth

reflection and observation of dysfunctions and implementing correctives strategies. Besides, we used the descriptive, analytic and the techno-pedagogical methods. The descriptive method describes different phenomena and situations happening during the instruction. The analytic method allows us to pinpoint the efficiency and weaknesses of the methods teachers use for teaching speaking. The techno-pedagogical method allows us to validate the effectiveness of WhatsApp for improving speaking.

In the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022, we carried out an investigation on speaking ability among EFL freshmen at teachers' training college in Brazzaville.

### **2.1. Participants**

We selected one hundred (100) EFL students from grade 1 of Teachers' training college (Marien NGOUABI university).

### **2.2. Instruments used for data collection**

To get genuine results, we used four (04) instruments for data collection: (1) questionnaires; (2) Classroom observation with a checklist and a dictaphone; (3) tests; (03) mobile phone. In addition, we use Excel software to analyze statistical data.

#### *2.2.1. Questionnaires*

We designed questionnaires for students before and after the implementation of mobile phone in communicative skills teaching. We present the results of this study in the next session entitled major findings and discussion.

#### *2.2.2. Classroom observation*

Classroom observation helped us to identify some phenomena and situations during instruction. We used a checklist and a Dictaphone to notify some situations and record students' utterances.

#### *2.2.3. Oral production tests*

Considering the results of students' questionnaires, we undertook to conduct two oral proficiency tests before and after the implementation of WhatsApp online platforms in communicative skills teaching. The aim was to check the impact of the use of ICTs in language teaching. For the validity and the reliability, we submitted the test contents to teachers of EFL Departments for amendments.

#### *2.2.4. Mobile phone*

This ICTs tool help to record learners 'performances for feedback and help them become autonomous in the learning process.

## **Major Findings and Discussion**

This section deals with the results of our investigation and the discussion as follows:

### **Major findings**

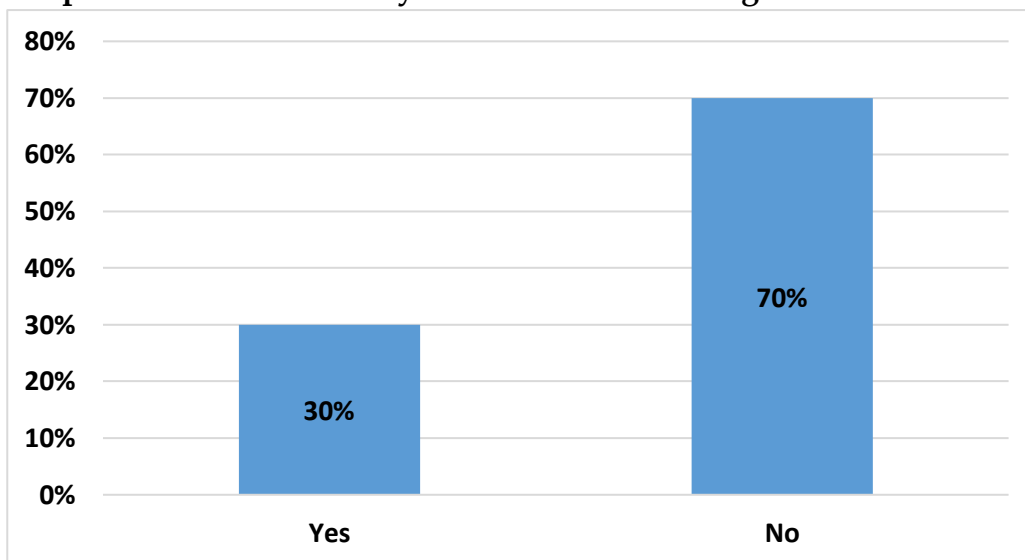
#### **Results related to the questionnaire for students**

The questionnaire for students focuses on three variables: ability to speak, difficulties and didactic material.

**Question n° 1: Can you fluently communicate in English in real-life situations? If no, which difficulties do you have?**

We ask this question to know if EFL students can easily express themselves in a conversation.

**Graph. n°1: Students ability to communicate in English in real-life situations**



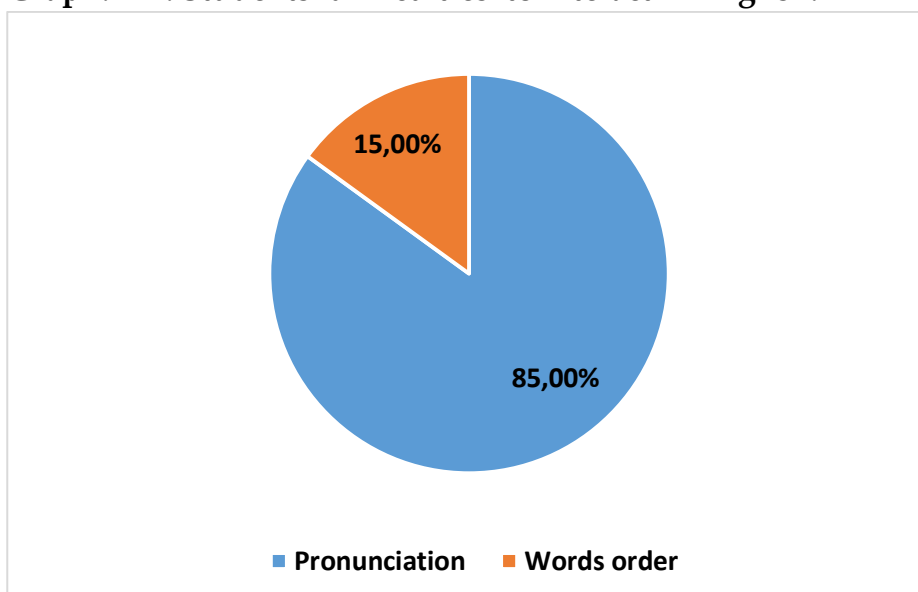
Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

The results of the above graph reveal that the majority of EFL students (70%) cannot easily exchange in the target language, though they have been studying English since secondary school.

**Question n°2: If no, which difficulties do you have?**

This question aims at knowing the types of difficulties students meet when speaking.

**Graph. n°2: Students' difficulties to interact in English.**



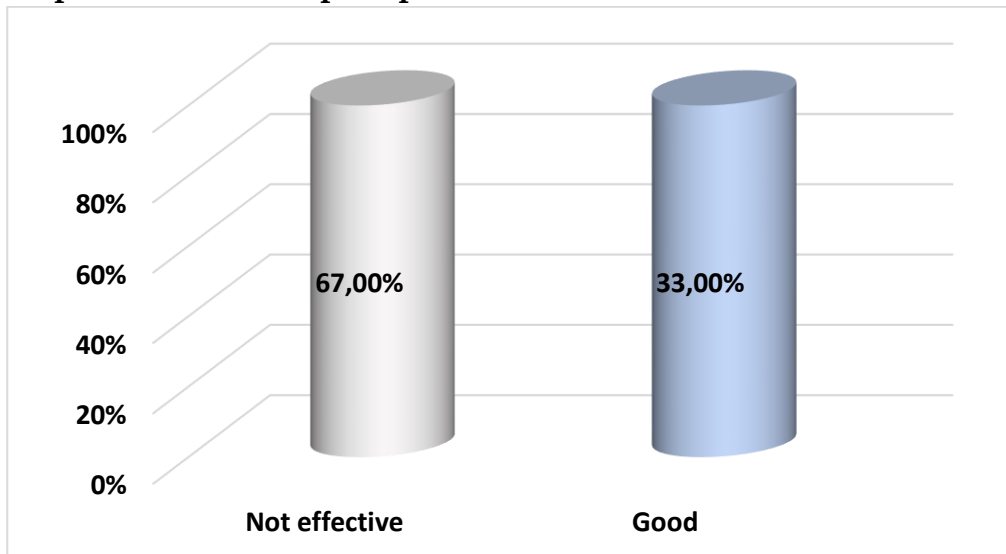
Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

Through the results of the above graph, we noticed that a great majority of EFL freshmen ( 85% ) have problem pronouncing words and few of them (15%) lack the mastery of syntactic structures.

**Question n° 2:** How do you appreciate the teaching material your teacher uses to teach communicative skills, namely speaking?

We asked this question to know the students' appreciation of the teaching material the teacher uses during instruction.

**Graph. n°3: Students' perception of the material the teacher uses to teach speaking.**



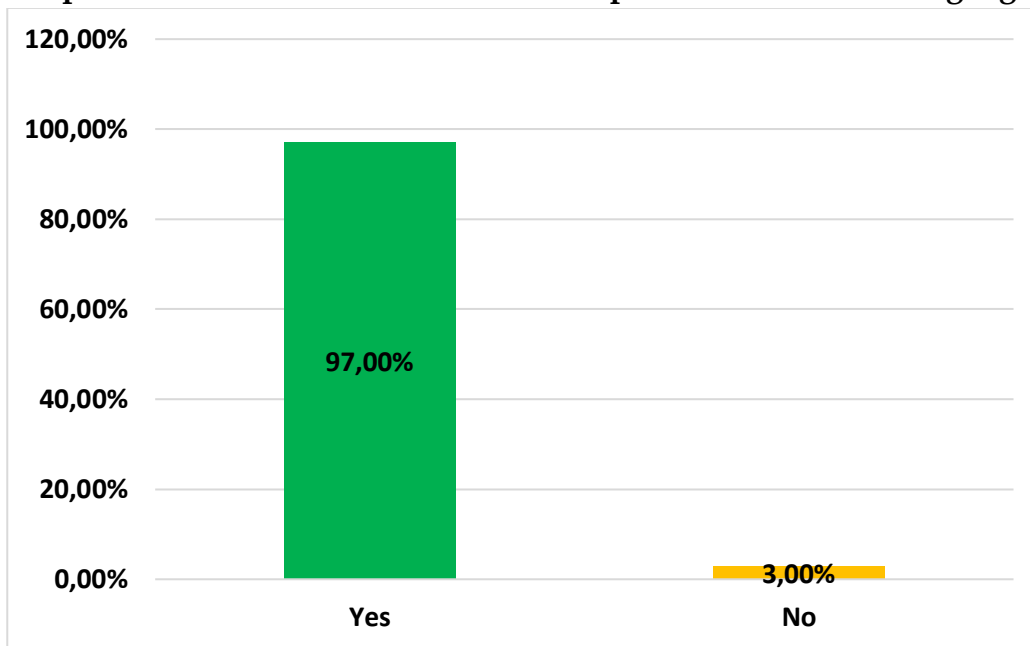
Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

The above results show that almost the majority of students (67%) depreciate the teaching material the teacher uses during instruction. They might need an effective teaching material instead of simple written texts.

**Question n° 3:** Are you aware of the importance of International Communication and Technologies (ICTs) tools in language learning? If yes, do you know how to use mobile phone, namely the WhatsApp ?

Through this question, we want to know whether students are aware of the impact of the use of ICTs in language learning above all the WhatsApp.

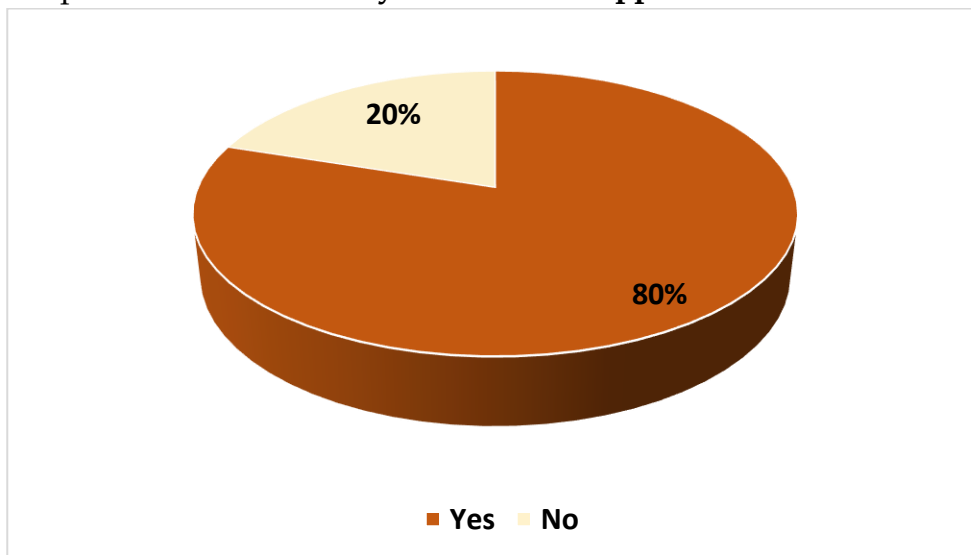
**Graph. n°4: Students awareness of the importance of ICTs in language learning.**



Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

Through the results of the above graph, the almost majority of EFL freshmen (97%) are aware of the importance of ICTs in language learning.

**Graph n°5 Students ability to use WhatsApp.**



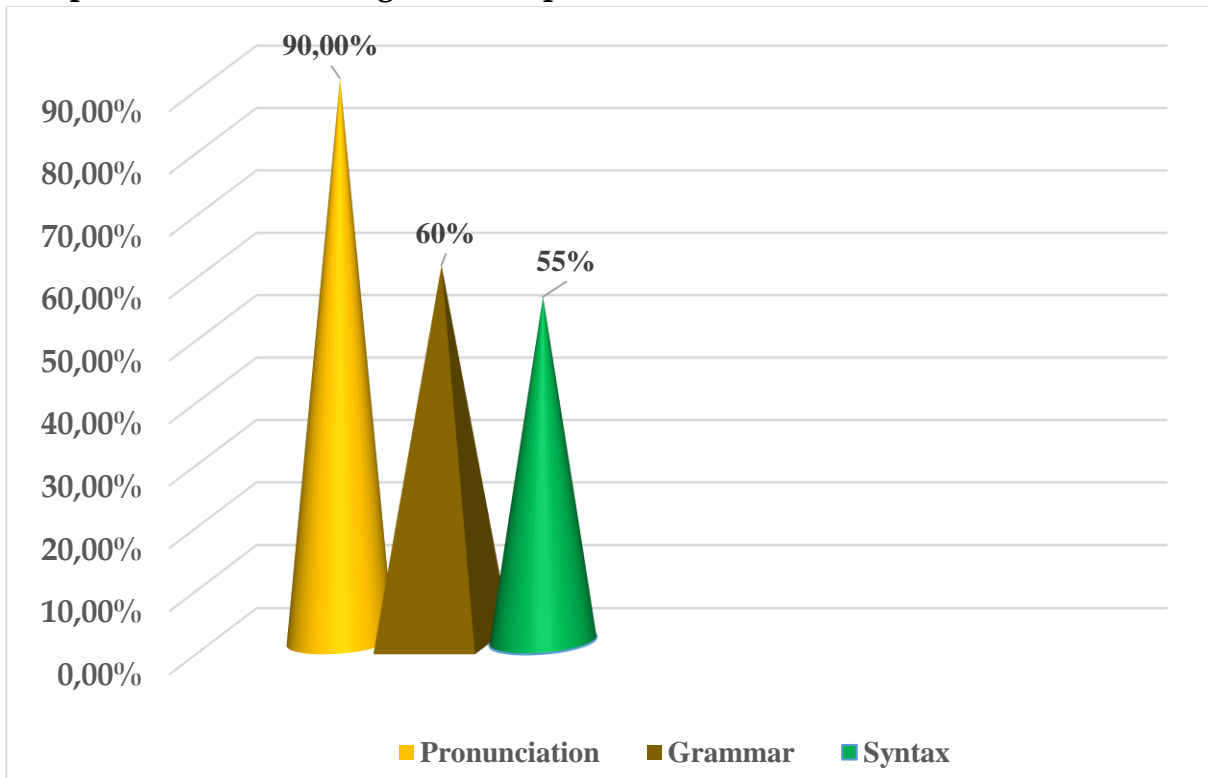
Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

The results of the above graph revealed that many students (80%) know to use the mobile phone and WhatsApp; which shows that they are not away from new technologies tools.

**Classroom observation results**

Classroom observation aimed at investigating the following variables: pronunciation, grammar and syntax mistakes.

**Graph n°6: Students' linguistic competences**



**Source :** R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

According to the results of the above graph about ninety (90%) percent of students have problem correctly pronouncing words, sixty (60%) percent of them lack the mastery of grammar structures when communicating and fifty-five(55%) misuse syntactic rules, namely words order in a sentence.

### **Learners' assessment**

#### **Results of the oral production tests.**

As aforementioned, we submitted students from grade 1 to oral proficiency tests to assess their ability to hold a conversation in a real-life situation. We administered two tests, the first took place on December 7, 2021 and the second on June 11, 2022. We asked students to give, within three minutes, the reasons for their studying English language. For reliability of score two EFL teachers assess the oral test.

#### **Scoring scheme of the oral proficiency test**

For the oral proficiency test, we assessed the following patterns of the language: 1)- the organization of ideas; 2)- pronunciation (long and short vowels, diphthong triphthong sounds and consonant sounds); 3)- grammar 4)- syntax.

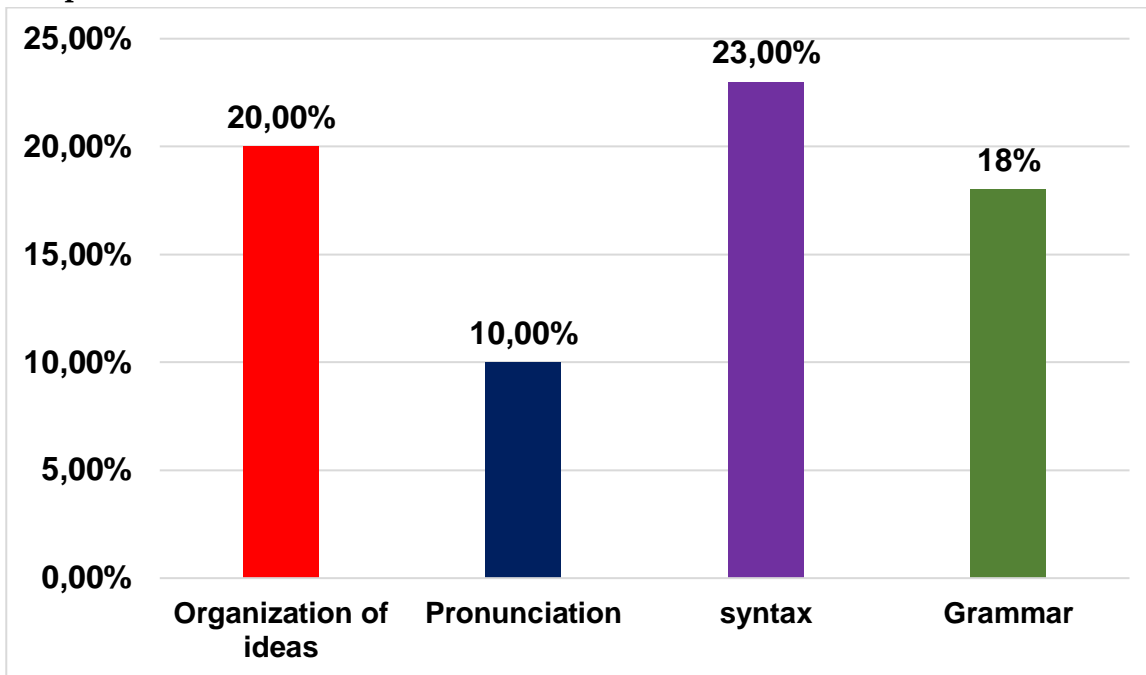
Besides, we applied, for scoring, the speaking rubric suggested by the University of Jyvaskyla. Each element scores from 1 to 5 marks, as described below.



**Table n°1: Assessment criteria for communication skills the University of Jyväskylä**

GRADE	INTERACTION	PROFESSIONAL VOCABULARY	LANGUAGE QUALITY	FLUENCY	PRONUNCIATION	PRESENTATION
Excellent (5)	Can present ideas articulately and persuasively in a complex discussion. Sophisticated arguing and turn-taking strategies. Has no difficulty in understanding idiomatic language use or different registers.	Has a very good command of professional vocabulary, allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions.	Can consistently maintain a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot. Correct use of idiomatic expressions and collocations.	Can express himself/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language. Wide vocabulary evident.	Mastery of the sound system of English is obvious. Accurate pronunciation and intonation in most instances.	Student is thoroughly familiar with the topic and can respond confidently and spontaneously to complex questions. Presentation is well structured, uses transitional elements, and follows the conventions of the field. Good eye contact, no reading from his/her paper. Level appropriate for intended audience.
Very good (4)	Can successfully present and justify ideas in a formal discussion. Turn-taking handled appropriately. Can recognise register shifts and a wide range of idiomatic expressions.	Has a good command of professional vocabulary, allowing gaps to be generally overcome with circumlocutions.	Can maintain a good degree of grammatical accuracy; occasional errors do not impede communication. Largely correct use of idiomatic expressions and collocations.	Fluent and spontaneous, but occasionally needs to search for expressions or compromise on saying exactly what he/she wants to.	Pronunciation and intonation generally accurate, errors do not cause misunderstanding.	Knows the topic well. Can handle complex questions with relative ease. Presentation is clearly structured and appropriate to the audience. Consistent use of transitional elements. Good eye contact, minimal need to refer to papers. Level appropriate for intended audience.
Good (3)	Keeps up with the discussion and can justify an opinion. Responds and interacts adequately with other speakers. Uses communication strategies well when unsure about e.g. idiomatic use.	Has an adequate vocabulary to express himself/herself on matters connected to his/her field.	Can communicate with reasonable accuracy and can correct mistakes if they have led to misunderstanding.	Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo. Although can be hesitant as he/she searches for expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses.	Some inaccuracy in pronunciation and intonation. Problems with voiced/voiceless consonants, for example.	Evidence of a standard three part structure and some use of transitional elements. Maintains contact with the audience. Level is appropriate, but the listener is not totally convinced that the presenter knows his/her topic well.
Satisfactory (2)	Has some difficulty keeping up with the discussion and arguing an opinion. Limited turn-taking and use of communication strategies.	Limited professional vocabulary.	Communication generally successful though limited in terms of accuracy. Some unresolved misunderstanding.	Generally acceptable tempo, but often hesitant as he/she searches for expressions. Some noticeable pauses.	Frequent inaccuracy in pronunciation and intonation. Mother tongue interference apparent.	Some structural weaknesses and only limited transitional elements. Basic level of acquaintance with the topic.
Poor (1)	Has marked difficulty in keeping up with the discussion and contributes only occasionally.	Basic professional vocabulary only.	Communication characterized by frequent inaccuracies and misunderstanding.	Frequent hesitations and pauses, can produce only short stretches of language at best	Key words regularly mispronounced, strong mother-tongue influence.	Structure lacks coherence. Speaker unfamiliar with topic. Transitional elements largely missing.
Inadequate (0)	Severe difficulty in following the discussion and no active involvement.	Professional vocabulary minimal.	Communication limited at best.	Cannot produce complex sentences or link phrases coherently.	Control of the sound system so weak that comprehension is difficult.	Lacks the features of an acceptable presentation

Graph n°7 Results of the oral test



Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

### First test results

The results of the first test prompted us to carry out some remedial activities by using WhatsApp groups to teach communicative skill, namely speaking. In fact, only twenty percent (20%) EFL students had coherent ideas when expressing themselves. Ten percent (10%) correctly uttered words in their speeches. Twenty-three (23%) respected words order in a sentence. Only eighteen percent (18%) accurately used grammar rules when communicating.. Therefore, we designed some new teaching techniques and activities as displayed in the table below:

Table n°2: teaching method and strategies used to enhance students' oral proficiencies

Method : Action Research
<p>Description of activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare some short audio files and videos on English language functions in accordance with notions included in the teaching curriculum of grade 1 level. The content may be a short audio file or video of dialogues, conversations or narrations in monologue;</li> <li>2. Set up ten (10) small WhatsApp groups composed of ten (10) students with administrators. We remains the main administrator of all groups. Then flip the class;</li> <li>3. Provide groups with clear instructions about the task to avoid confusion. Thus, students know what they do and how we assess them;</li> <li>4. Send two short audio files or two short videos of dialogues, conversation or narrations to each group;</li> </ol>

5. Ask each member to listen to these audios or watch these videos within a week with particular attention to :
- The way characters organize their ideas, interact, pronounce and use words in appropriate contexts: the stress on syllables, diphthong and triphthong sounds, the different pronunciations of “ the” before consonants and vowels and also “ h” in which words it is mute;
  - The appropriate grammatical and syntactic structures.

The assignment is that, the following week, students likewise repeat the same audio files (tracks) in monologue and send them back to us for feedback on the pronunciation. Concerning short videos of dialogues or conversations, members of each group play such or such a character’s role, shoot the role play and send us the record for feedback. The aim is to check if students have mastered words pronunciation after watching the material and help those who still have difficulties with words pronunciation.

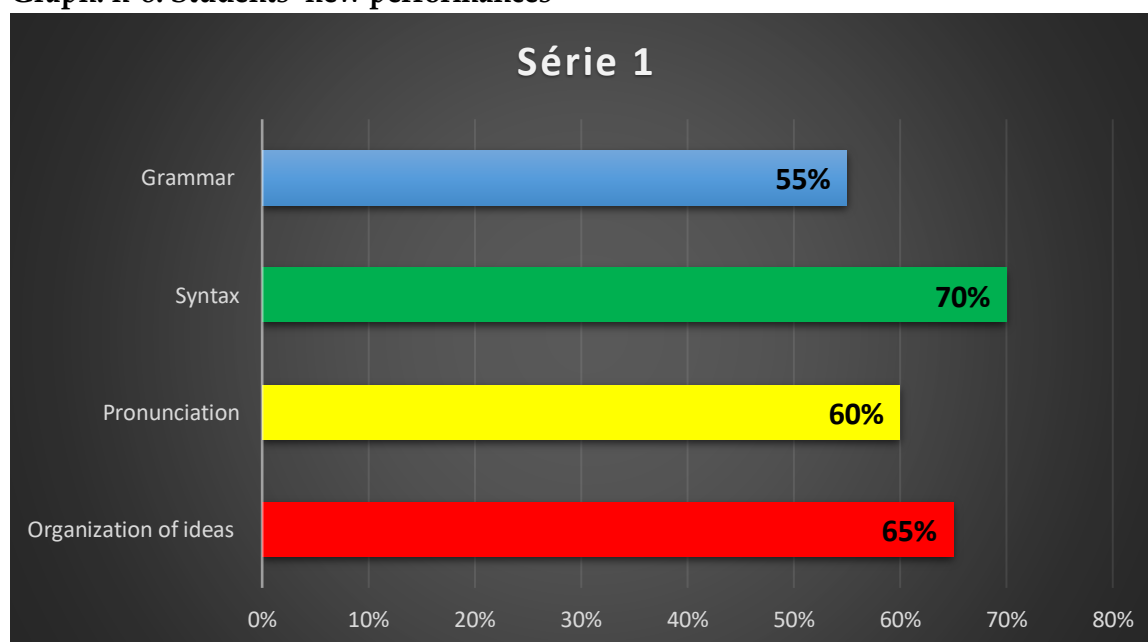
Afterwards, we select some topics related the program and send them to different groups and ask each student to make some narrative audios ( tracks) about and share in his or her group within five days.

- Students first discuss their audios (tracks) in groups as a collaborative work; then, together we react by chat to each audio (tracks) shared, using the following criteria: 1). the organization of ideas; 2) words pronunciation and contexts of use; 3) grammar and syntax structures. Students take notes.

In class, we emphasize language patterns and organize groups’ presentations on real-life situations to help students improve their spoken English through interaction and debates.

Question n°4: After one semester of intensive training with whatsapp online groups, we submitted students to the second oral test on the same language patterns. The graphic below displays.

**Graph. n°8: Students’ new performances**



**Source : R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.**

The results of the above graph show that the majority of students seventy percent (70%) made improvements on syntax. They come to respect words order in a sentence. Sixty-five percent (65%) students have logical ideas when expressing themselves. Sixty percent (60%) of them improve their pronunciation and use words in their right contexts; they develop a certain fluency in their speech. Fifty-five (55%) students correctly apply grammar rules in their speech.

The comparison of students' new performances in the post-test show that there been improvements.

**Table n° 3: Comparison of students' percentages of success between the pre-test and the post-test.**

Subject-matter	Tests	Percentage of success	Percentage difference
Organization of ideas	Pre-test	20	45
	Post-test	65	
Pronunciation	Pre-test	10	50
	Post-test	60	
Syntax	Pre-test	23	47
	Post-test	70	
Grammar	Pre-test	18	37
	Post-test	55	

**Source :** R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

The above table reveals that the rate of success increased after the implementation of WhatsApp online platforms.

Considering the results of the post-test we designed new questionnaire and submitted to students.

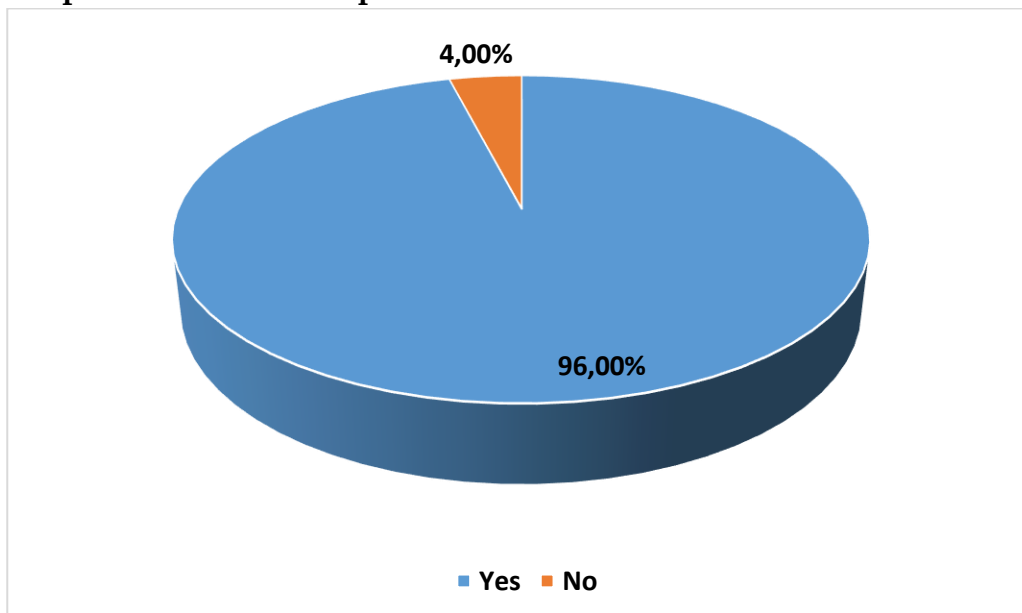
**Results of new students' questionnaire**

The aim was to know students appreciations of online learning groups

**Question n°5: Did the use of WhatsApp online groups help you to improve your speaking? If yes, to what extent is it helpful?**

We asked this question to get students' perception of WhatsApp online groups in Language learning.

**Graph n°9: students' responses**



**Source :** R. ALLEMBE, 2021-2022.

The above results show that the majority of students (96%) are satisfied with the implementation of WhatsApp application in the teaching and learning process.

- **If yes, to what extent is it helpful?**

We designed this question to know how effective online learning groups are.

**Students' viewpoints on the implementation of WhatsApp groups.**

Learning English through WhatsApp online groups increases our motivation and engagement in the activities proposed by the teacher. It reduces the level of anxiety and gives more space for learning. Otherwise, we have more time to listen to audios or watch videos; we come back to the material at any time we want and chat with peers or the teacher for clear explanation. Whereas in class the teacher has a limited time. We cannot discuss a lot on notions we do not understand.

**Conclusion**

This study investigates the effectiveness of WhatsApp online platforms for teaching speaking. Our hypotheses are as follows: 1). The implementation of WhatsApp online groups provides more space for learning and teachers can use audio files and videos to stir up students' interests and engagement; 2). Students might improve their speaking proficiency through audio files and videos shared in groups. They can listen to or watch the material at any moment and interact with peers and the teacher on difficult points. The time is not limited as in the classroom.

During the implementation, WhatsApp promoted cooperation between students, since everyone could produce his own material for sharing in the group. Students acquired language patterns through discussion on their shared works in groups. Introverted students felt more comfortable than during face-to-face classes to ask questions or share interests. The learning time was not limited. Students could review audio and videos files for tasks at any moment.

The results revealed that students are motivated to learn with WhatsApp application. In fact, the use of WhatsApp online platforms helped students have more space and time for learning and improve their speaking skills through audio files and videos shared.

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