

*Article*

## **WhatsApp-based Learning in Ecole normale supérieure de Yaoundé-Cameroon at the Time of Coronavirus**

**Daniel A. Nkemleke \***

**Lynda Tume Leinyuy**

University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon

### **Abstract**

Mobile apps have been shown to enhance students' motivation in the learning of English. With the outbreak of the corona virus, where safe distancing became one of the strategies to limit its propagation, WhatsApp became a practical medium for delivering content for us at the Ecole normale supérieure de Yaoundé. This article illustrates how we used a WhatsApp forum to run a class project on summary writing, which required each student to watch a movie online and write a holistic summary of it. The summaries were intended to be part of the entries for a database of resources for the study of African cultures, which have parallels to classical mythology. Four weeks into the second semester, Covid-19 forced a complete shutdown of our university. As part of the movie online exercise, we created the African Mythology WhatsApp group or forum. Lessons on "how-to" were conducted via WhatsApp. At the end of 7 weeks of online interaction in a class of 32 students and teachers, students reported that the WhatsApp experiment enhanced their writing skills, including the ability to write holistic summaries. Some students said their creativity was developed, and academic horizons widened. A few stated that the WhatsApp learning experience was better than the usual face-to-face class interaction. We concluded that there are clear benefits for using WhatsApp in the teaching and learning of writing. We should continue to explore the opportunities that technology offers for language education as a whole.

### **Keywords**

Writing summaries, WhatsApp, coronavirus, Cameroon

## **1 Introduction**

The creation of WhatsApp in 2009 (Barhoumi, 2015) added unto the arsenal of computer-mediated communication technologies yet another user-friendly app which has revolutionized human interaction in significant ways. Like Facebook before it, WhatsApp has become an undisputable learning tool in

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### **\*Corresponding Author.**

Address: P.O. BOX 8036 Yaoundé-Cameroon

E-mail: [nkemlekedan@yahoo@yahoo.com](mailto:nkemlekedan@yahoo@yahoo.com)

English foreign language situations (cf. Kacetyl & Klímová, 2019; Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi, 2017), particularly in the way it has been shown to enhance student-teacher interaction in virtual space (Holley & Dobson, 2008; Cifuentes & Lents, 2011). When physical distancing became a key safety measure throughout the world because of the outbreak of the coronavirus, it became imperative for teachers to deliver content online, to “save the academic year” (Cameroon Tribune, 2020, p. 2)<sup>1</sup> and WhatsApp suddenly became very popular among teachers and students at the Ecole normale supérieure (ENS) de Yaoundé - a teacher training college attached to the University of Yaoundé 1 in Cameroon. A WhatsApp forum was created for every course in the department of English. Two reasons motivated the use of WhatsApp. First, smartphones are very cheap in Cameroon, and as a result almost every student in the university owns one (and WhatsApp is easy to install). Second, our students predominantly come from families with limited resources and WhatsApp is inexpensive to use. Alternatives such as ZOOM and Skype require more internet data consumption<sup>2</sup>. This paper reports on our WhatsApp experience in summary writing, an important component of our Academic Writing course, which is attended by a class of 32 pre-service teachers, and their feedback. It is hoped that our experience will be relevant to other universities in similar situations, which may be struggling to cope with teaching at this time of Covid-19.

## **2 Cameroon, Education System and Students’ Language Background**

Cameroon is a medium-size Central African country with English and French as official languages of instruction and public administration (Koenig et. al, 1983; Wolf, 2001). These official languages operate within the context of more than 280 indigenous languages. In addition, there is a lingua franca, Cameroon Pidgin English (Schröder, 2003), spoken in informal situations. Although English and French are languages of instruction and administration, not everyone speaks both languages. There are no official statistics on the number of people who speak these official languages. The most recent survey of English in Cameroon only concludes that ‘French by far surpasses English in Cameroon outside the Anglophone provinces, even in domains that are supposed to be bilingual’ (Wolf, 2001, p.179). This conclusion is not surprising given the disparity of the English-speaking and French-speaking populations of the country, which has been estimated to be 20 % and 80 % respectively (Kouega, 2001, p.112; Shiri, 2007, p.31). Despite the dominance of French, the government policy on language education in Cameroon has been to consider English and French as official languages of the country with equal status. Since independence in 1960, and reunification in 1972 (when French-Cameroon and English-Cameroon decided to merge to become one bilingual unitary state), many reforms on language education have been undertaken. These include huge investment in the construction of bilingual schools, the establishment of teacher training institutions such as the Ecole Normale Supérieure for training language teachers and other subjects’ teachers, the passing of legislation to guarantee equitable use of the two languages in government administration and public services, the creation of off-campus bilingual training centers in major towns of the country where people already in the work force can improve their language skills, etc.

The education system is organized in both English and French from primary school to the university. Although in the past several years, there have been attempts to introduce indigenous languages to the curriculum, and this has remained an experimental project for the most part. English and French are referred to as “service subjects” because of their status as official languages. They are taught as subjects in the curriculum, and are also used to teach other subjects. German and Spanish are also studied from the level of secondary schools up to the universities, but these are only optional subjects. Recently, Chinese has been introduced in some universities as a subject.

Due to the high demand for English language education in Cameroon (Ubanako, 2016), the training of teachers at ENS de Yaoundé has been one of the top priorities of the government. In the last 10 years, three such institutions have been established in the country, bringing the total to four. Students are admitted into these training schools through a highly competitive entrance examination, and they

graduate after 4 semesters (if they come in with a first degree) or 6 semesters (if they come in with the high school certificate: General Certificate of Education, GCE Advanced Level) of intensive training, and several months of internship in local schools. Those studying 4 semesters (i.e. those with a first degree) are additionally required to write a dissertation on a topic on the teaching of a language or literature, or applied linguistics. This requirement has over the years made the course on academic writing in the department of English at ENS a key component. These students are awarded a professional diploma in language teaching, DIPES II (second-grade secondary education teacher diploma), at the end of the 4-semester course. The DIPES II may be considered as equivalent to an MA in education. By contrast, the students entering with A-levels are not required to write a dissertation and are awarded a DIPES I at the end of the 6-semester course.

The academic writing course discussed in this paper prepares these students for the task of writing in higher education and writing in the genre (cf. Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004; Murray & Beglar, 2009). It fills a critical gap in students' knowledge of academic English. The following description by Echu, Mforteh, & Sala (2008, p.4-5) on Cameroon paints a picture of the proficiency of the average language student in our class before they come to ENS de Yaoundé.

The falling standards in English has become the concern of educationists, school authorities, language teachers and parents. While it is common for university teachers to blame secondary school teachers for student's low performance in English, the secondary school teachers in turn transfer the blame to elementary school teachers. This has made it difficult for the language skills acquired by the students moving from one level to the other to be controlled and guaranteed [...] Classroom practices have depended, for the most part, on the whims of the individual teacher. [...] There have even been extreme pathetic cases where students are taught the same thing year in year out, or are not taught at all.

The design of undergraduate language courses across universities in Cameroon are based on structural analysis of the language taught (Ncheafor, 2006; Niba, 2007; Echu et al, 2008, for example). Ncheafor (2006), a popular language text book for students in the University of Bamenda for many years, basically follows Quick's (1972) outline: definition of grammar, verbs, nouns, adjectives, sentence structure etc. The volume by Echu et al (2008), used in the undergraduate programme in the University of Yaoundé 1, is essentially a compilation of short reading texts from other sources, followed by questions and gap-filling exercises. The University of Buea has a course on essay writing, so-called 'long essay' (Ojongnkpot, 2016); but this is only reserved for the final year. Writing academic English, especially summary writing, is therefore not a course that our students have done by the time they enrolled in ENS; they were not introduced to writing academic summaries before. Feedback from students on what they learned from the exercise highlights this gap (see Appendix).

Before the formal announcement on March 18 to suspend classes as a result of the coronavirus, the second semester, which had been scheduled to run for 15 weeks, beginning February 17 to May 29, had only run for 4 weeks. We had only briefly discussed summary writing, a key component of the academic writing course, at this stage. The decision to take the remaining workload of the course onto a WhatsApp platform was therefore timely, especially as ENS could not mobilize the necessary resources needed to accommodate all courses in its existing learning management system at such short notice. Our university is under-funded and so professional learning management systems such as MOOC and Moodle cannot be widely exploited. The only MOOC centre that the University of Yaoundé 1 has is located at the School of Engineering, where the technical expertise is found. The other faculties of the University, including ENS de Yaoundé, run Moodle programmes, but many teachers lack the necessary skills to engage with it.

### **3 Mobile Technologies and Language Learning: The Case of WhatsApp**

Mobile technologies and applications, e.g. WhatsApp, have gained currency in general pedagogy, including ELT. In fact, WhatsApp extends the advances made by e-learning into what Kacatl & Klímová (2019, p. 1) refer to as ‘mobile learning’. The main advantage of using WhatsApp for pedagogic purposes is that interaction is ubiquitous and students can work independently and on their own time. Furthermore, because smartphones are portable and user-friendly, students are motivated to engage with them. Writing about the value of WhatsApp, Rambe & Chipunza (2013) claim that it is among many other apps that make learning a pleasant experience in that it allows students to freely express themselves. Any language activity online thus fosters the spirit of collaboration that is not easy to create in the traditional face-to-face classroom context. WhatsApp mediation tends to create an enabling environment for sustainable collaborative work (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999), and has proved to be very relevant in teacher-student interaction at this time of the coronavirus at ENS Yaoundé. Awada (2016) investigates the reaction of Arabic students in Rhetoric classes in two English medium universities to the use of WhatsApp in the teaching of critique writing. The study reports that the experimental group learners found WhatsApp mediation beneficial and enjoyable. The study concludes among other things that WhatsApp is affordable and more efficient than other similar applications. Awada (2016, p. 17) additionally states that WhatsApp is ‘a discussion forum that would enable instructors and students to initiate discussions that would improve learning and increase motivation’ (Awada, 2016, p.17). WhatsApp has been shown to be an active involvement tool in critique writing learning (Rambe & Chipunza, 2013). Its capability for texting and instant messaging makes it ‘a useful practical tool for increasing learner’s communication among peers and teachers in higher education’ (Awada, 2016, p. 5; cf. Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014).

So far, studies on the application of WhatsApp in education have shown that the app is useful and beneficial for learning and teaching English, thanks to its unique features of “interactivity”, “ubiquity”, “portability” (Kacatl & Klímová, 2019, p.1) and potential to enhance students’ motivation (Rambe & Chipunza, 2013). Now, Covid-19 has offered us the opportunity to test these claims.

### **4 Methodological Aspects**

This section discusses the nature of our WhatsApp class project (4.1) and the specific instructions that students were expected to follow (4.2). Section 4.3 details the day-to-day follow-up of the class.

#### **4.1 The class project on summary writing**

After authorities detected its first Covid-19 cases on March 6 in a local airport, Cameroon closed schools on March 18, and imposed safe distancing measures in public places throughout the country. The administration of ENS de Yaoundé decided that teaching for the 2019/2020 academic year had to be delivered online. Consequently, teachers in the department of English created WhatsApp groups to link up with students. Our class project on summary writing began in this context. As noted in section 1, Academic Writing is a core module in our department in which we generally emphasise reading and writing academic summaries. In this module, students are introduced to basic academic writing concepts such as coherence, cohesion, academic style, writing in the genres (abstracts, introduction to research papers etc.) and writing summaries. Here is the module description:

The course aims to introduce apprentice writers to the general field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), while focussing on specific academic writing conventions at textual level. These conventions include hedging, metadiscourse, lexical choices, interaction in text, cohesion and coherence etc. Comparison of students’ texts with those of experienced academic

writers drawn from research journals and published books will constitute the core of classroom activities. Students will be expected to read a lot of material in advance in order to participate fully in class discussion. Students are expected to submit a written essay on a topic of choice. They may be asked to write an original essay or read and summarize a long text etc.

These activities are usually done in the traditional face-to-face classroom situation. The coronavirus outbreak happened 4 weeks into the semester, and we decided to take the rest of the activities online on WhatsApp.

## 4.2 Specific instructions on choosing a movie

We decided to name our WhatsApp forum “African Mythology”. The task for each student was to watch an African movie inspired by aspects of African mythology and culture online and write a holistic summary of 700-800 words. They had to avoid online plagiarism, that is, not to copy summaries already available online. They were informed that these summaries would be part of a database of an EU-funded research project *Our Mythical Childhood: The reception of classical antiquity in children’s and young adults’ culture in response to regional and global challenges* ([www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl](http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl)). Therefore, the chosen movie had to meet one basic criterion to qualify for this database, namely exhibit an aspect(s) of African culture, belief system etc. that have parallels in classical mythology. For the students, these summaries were their first ever texts to be considered for publication; and so they were very excited about it.

The following instructions were to be followed to structure the summary:

*Heading: please begin your summary by indicating:*

1. Name of the director of the movie (his/her year of birth, if available)
2. His/her short bio in your own words, if available
3. Title of the movie and official website
4. Production company
5. Original language (e.g. was the movie first produced in English or another language)
6. Country of origin (e.g. Nigeria, Cameroon)
7. Release date (mention only year)
8. Running time (e.g. 90 minutes)
9. Cast (if you can identify the list of persons)

*Body: Please write a “holistic” summary*

10. Your summary should not be a line by line rendition of what goes on in the movie
11. Watch the movie and write a coherent text
12. Edit your summary for good punctuation, syntax and redundancies
13. When finished, send to the following electronic address -----

Two teachers and a research assistant guided the students to select the right movie. Every student sent a short preview of a chosen movie to the WhatsApp forum and the teachers determined whether there were sufficient elements of African culture/mythology in it to merit being included in the database of *Our Mythical Childhood* project. This process in some cases took days, until a final decision was given to go ahead. The four exchanges below illustrate the nature of the interaction between 4 students, Sheela, Elie, Mark, Alice, and the teacher in the process of selecting a movie<sup>3</sup>.

## Exchange 1: Sheela (S) and Teacher (T)

**S:** Good day Sir, due to the fact that my movie wasn't appropriate, I decided to work on "The powerful Little Girl". This movie talks about a woman called Chinyere, who is a widow and her only daughter Kasima is killed by her uncle because she is a woman. Her spirit is restless because her mother cries on her grave every day. Nobody is able to see her or hear her. Obiajulu another male spirit who is sent to help Kasima teaches her how to be able to touch and feel. Kasima (spirit), helps her mother in the house chores and when her mother wakes up in the morning, she is surprised. Few years later, the gods decide to bless chinyere with achild who will help her and comfort her. The villagers begins [sic] to wonder how she becomes pregnant without meeting any man. She ...

Sir, this is the highlights of my new movie.

**T:** Ok go ahead!

**S:** Thank you, Sir.

## Exchange 2: Elie (E) and the Teacher (T)

**E:** I sent you a trailer. Can I work on the movie?

**T:** No!! "The legend of aguba" is NOT accepted. It deals with a typically universal themes with no mythical link. Please I thought you ought to have realized this yourself in the light of All the criteria we listed. Please contact **T2** [the other teacher] for a different movie.... maybe from Ghana.

**E:** Good evening Sir, while searching online, I saw the legend of aguba as a myth so I knew it was appropriate. Ok sir I will contact **T2** as you said. Thank you, sir.

Exchanges 1 and 2 concern students' inquiry about previews of the movies which they had sent to the forum for approval. The former contains an entire preview of a movie. While previews of many students were accepted at first submission, others had to submit more than once to get approval to continue with the holistic summary. This is the case of Elie in exchange 2. The following statement by the teacher: "please I thought you ought to have realized this yourself in the light of All the criteria we listed" implies that this is not the first time Elie was submitting a preview. In fact, the statement may be interpreted as a mild rebuke. The teacher is covertly saying that the listed criteria for selecting a movie are clear enough for anyone not to understand. To safe face, the refer the student to the other teacher for help. On the other hand, Elie justifies her choice in the following statement: "good evening Sir, while searching online, I saw the legend of aguba as a myth so I knew it was appropriate"; although she immediately softens her apparent resolve by saying "Ok sir I will contact T2 as you said".

## Exchange 3: Mark (M) and the Teacher (T)

**M:** Good morning sir, I sent my summary this morning.

**T:** Your summary is of course well written. But the subject matter is the same with movies like "Egg of life" etc. Your movie is in search of a golden spoon, others were in search of a golden stone and a golden egg etc. While it is not accepted. You don't have to do another movie. You have already done your best. Thank you for your efforts.

**M:** Thank you sir. It's rather unfortunate that movies failed me all along. Thanks again for being comprehensible.

## Exchange 4: Alice (A) and the Teacher (T)

**A:** "Eyes of the Deity" is a movie directed by Yellow Face Umeli. The movie opens in Ameke village, headed by a polygamous king. His first wife, a jealous woman sees her son's birthright

threatened by the existence of the second wife's son. She persuades her son, Okoro (the heir apparent of Ameke village), to eliminate his younger half-brother, Emeka. ... Read more

**T:** Just go ahead with your eyes of Deity. Although we have had similar stories from the others. We have no time left for you to change.

In exchange 3 Mark's holistic summary does not meet the stated criteria of entries for the database. However, the teacher exempts him because he has already done a lot of work. The background here is that two previews submitted by him were rejected, and the third time he went ahead with the summary without prior approval by the teacher. This is not to be interpreted as role flouting. Mark assumed that after two failed attempts he got the third one right, but still he was wrong. His reply at the end of that exchange indicates that he would have liked to write a successful holistic summary, but the "movies failed [him]", to use his own words. The WhatsApp forum provided space in which students could freely interact and say what they thought in a lighthearted manner. While the teachers were available to help students locate appropriate movies, a few of the students had a hard time finding one. When it became too difficult, we accepted that some of them could go ahead with any movie they could find, even if there are no African cultural elements with parallels in classical mythology. After all, the goal of the whole exercise was for students to write a holistic summary. This is the case of Mark and Alice in exchanges 3 and 4 above respectively.

#### 4.3 Day-to-day follow-up of the task, the virtual classroom

The sample student-teacher exchanges above are typical of what happened on a regular basis with our writing class on WhatsApp for 7 weeks. As Bouhnik & Deshen (2014) note, WhatsApp has different functions including sending of instant messages, sharing of voice messages, and linking web addresses. Furthermore, students' autonomy is guaranteed; they can send messages, ask questions at any time and the teacher can give feedback. Our forum was created on March 13, in anticipation of the closing of schools to increase physical distancing. Our online class ended on May 4, the day on which the last set of summaries were received. This makes a total of roughly 7 weeks of regular interaction on the platform. In the course of these interactions, we received questions ranging from what to do in a case where there was not enough information to write a short biography of the director, to whether or not a particular movie would actually meet the strict criterion of an African culture in the context of classical mythology. On the basis of this criterion, only 25 summaries out of 32 were finally qualified for the database. However, in the end every student had written a holistic summary even if not all qualified for inclusion in the database. These summaries were submitted via the same forum to Lynda Tume Leinyuy, co-author of this paper (see Fig. 1), who in turn forwarded to me.

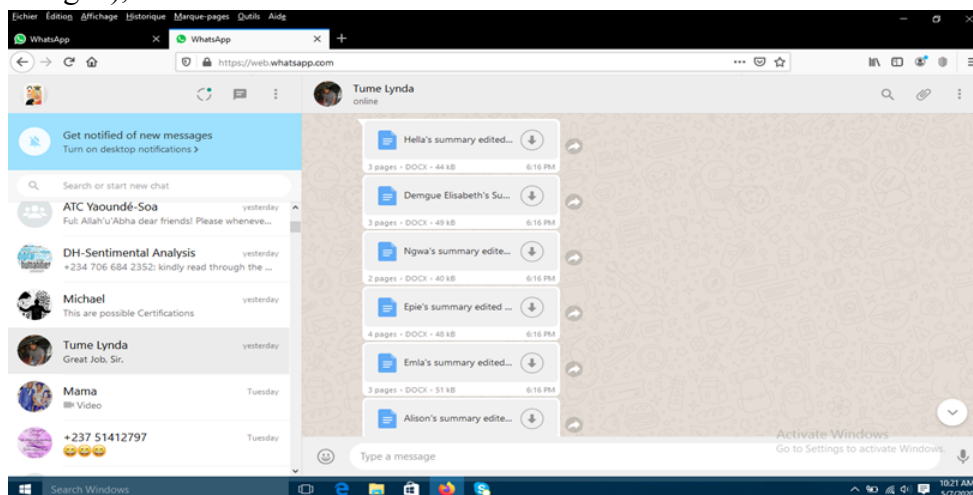


Figure 1. Holistic summary writing submission trajectory

## 5 Results

This section focuses on the results of our experiment. Section 5.1 discusses patterns of interaction that were commonly used. The frequency of class participation is described in 5.2, and students' impressions are given in 5.3.

### 5.1. Patterns of interaction

Research has established only five interaction patterns in a traditional classroom setting: TT (teacher very active, students only receptive); T (teacher active, student mainly receptive); TS (teachers and students fairly equally active); S (students active, teacher mainly receptive); and SS (students very active, teacher only receptive) (Ur, 2004:227)<sup>4</sup>. However, the interaction patterns could be more specific. Our 7-week of exchanges in the WhatsApp forum showcased twelve specific interaction patterns, including 201 exclamations (e.g. really beautiful! congrats dear!) and expressions of thanks and gratitude such as 'thank you!', 'I am grateful, sir'. Most exclamations were often accompanied by various types of emoticons (e.g. a thumb up, a smiley). Table 1 is a recapitulation of the interaction patterns observed.

Table 1

*Types/number of Interaction Patterns on Our WhatsApp Forum*

No.	Code	Teacher/student reaction	No. times
1	Sa-T	student says 'thank you', 'thank you, sir' etc. to a comment made by the teacher	72
2	Sg-T	student greets teacher before asking a question	56
3	Sf-T	student gives feedback to teacher's request	54
4	Tc-S	teacher makes a clarification on an issue that is of general interest to all students	32
5	Ti-S	teacher instructs students on the basis of a question asked	17
6	Sq-T	student questions teacher	29
7	Sc-S	student congratulates fellow student after teacher commended the effort of that student	23
8	To-S	teacher makes a specific observation to the attention of a specific student	22
9	Tr-S	teacher reacts positively to a student's work and/or to an observation a student made	14
10	Tq-f	teacher asks a question and gets feedback	9
11	Sc-T	student comments on teacher's remarks to another student	7
12	Sr-S	student reacts to another student's comment and/or question	4
Total			339

These patterns show that the WhatsApp environment encourages students' engagement more than a physical classroom setting does. Our WhatsApp interaction did not only take place between teacher and students, but also among students. This is why interaction patterns Number 11 and 12, though less frequent, may be considered even more significant, because they are not common in the usual physical classroom. In the normal face-to-face situation, students would preserve face (Brown & Levinson 1987; Leech, 1983). (Face is a key concept of the politeness theory in which 'a model person is endowed with two particular wants - roughly, the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects' p.58). They would usually not question comments, claims and/or assertions made by a classmate because it might embarrass them. The WhatsApp forum provided a safe, virtual environment in which questions were asked or comments made. An example of the dynamic of teacher-student and student-student instantaneous communication in the forum is given in exchange 5 below. The first series of interactions was a reaction to a very good summary that a student (Agi) submitted. Immediately



after we posted the summary and my comments, reactions poured in from the rest of the class, and this continued for several days. This spurred the rest of the students to work. A few days later, we posted another successful summary. The reactions from the class was similar and extended for days. This pattern of free interaction continued until everyone had submitted their assignment: each time a good summary was received, it was immediately shared so that others could read and improved on their own work.

Exchange 5. Teacher's feedback and students' reactions on a summary posted in the forum

**[Tr-S]** I am very pleased to share with all of you ONE of the most excellent summaries I have so far read. The author is Agi. Congratulation Agi for this impeccable English! Please I recommend it as a good example of English language (academic language) rhetoric. This is the way you have to think and write!!!! (From African Mythology WhatsApp group @ ENS Yaoundé:

**[Sa-T]** Thank you very much, Sir. I am so grateful.

**[Sc-T]** I am thankful, my Queen

**[Sc-T]** This is beautiful!

**[Sc-T]** Really beautiful!

**[Sc-T]** Congrats dear!

**[Sr-S]** Thank you, dear!

**[Sc-T]** Congrats

**[Sr-S]** Thank you everyone

**[Tr-S]** Congratulation to Maga for a very nice summary of "My wife is half spirit". I will share it on the group soon (From African Mythology WhatsApp group @ENS Yaoundé:

**[Tr-S]** Bernice has also written a good story. But she has to answer one little question. But her summary is accepted. Who can send me her personal number<sup>5</sup>?

**[Tr-S]** Bernice is successful with a beautiful epic movie of Igbo people

**[To-S]** I have enclosed two good summaries from Maga and Bernice, for your entertainment. Please try to write like them, and of course, the other one yesterday by Agi. I mean they are well written. I am sharing them as examples for others to follow.

The most obvious advantage of using WhatsApp to communicate in this context of a class project is that students have ample time to ask questions, receive feedback, and socialize with other classmates - time that is often not available in a physical classroom setting (cf. Oxford, 1990). Since there was no official class time for our forum, there was no restriction on when a question could be asked and the teacher could respond at any time. In fact, there was interaction in the morning, afternoon and even in the evening (e.g. see Appendix, where students begin their feedback with greetings and indicate the time of the day). In many instances during our 7 weeks of interactions, I posted something late in the evening and each time I received almost immediate responses. What could be concluded here is that WhatsApp was the only affordable means of communication (i) among students, (ii) between students and teachers and (iii) between students and administration of ENS during the period of confinement. It was also used for matters not directly related to the course - e.g. inquiry on the dissertation process, announcements from administration to students.

## 5.2 Class participation

Class participation in our WhatsApp forum was 100%. Every student asked a question, made an observation, complemented someone and/or offered a suggestion. An interesting finding was that students

complemented each other whenever the teacher posted positive feedback on their work. This is rare in a face-to-face class. However, while students all had something to say, not all of them posted messages with the same frequency; some students posted more messages than the others. Fig. 2 plots the frequency with which the students intervened in the forum discussions prior, during, and after assignments had been submitted. Nevertheless, the figure does suggest that insofar as our WhatsApp experiment was concerned, a learning community was quickly created, and students found in the WhatsApp forum therapy to their isolation; the lockdown had lasted for weeks but the WhatsApp group provided an opportunity for every student to reconnect with the class.

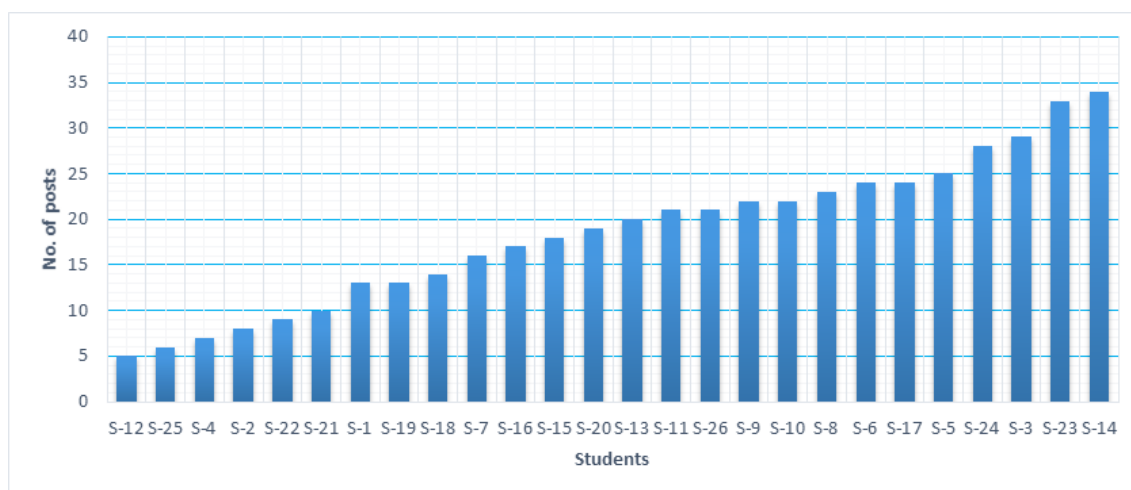


Figure 2. Rate of class participation in the WhatsApp forum

Rovai (2002, quoted in Awada, 2016, p. 4) observes that ‘WhatsApp mediation helps the learners to get inquires quickly answered while participating in a supportive, interactive, and collaborative community’. Our experience throughout the 7 weeks of active interaction was consistent with Rovai’s observation. Many students asked questions for clarification when they first watched the movies. Because the students could easily pose their questions and receive feedback, the forum became a very lively chat room, and student-teacher interactions occurred throughout the 7 days of the week, and extending into the evenings. Exchange 6 is an example of several of such interactions that spanned through several days.

Exchange 6. An example of an all-day long student-teacher discussion on students’ work

April 3, 2020

[Sa-T]: Thanks for reading my work Sir. I have taken note. I will do my best

[Ti-S]: Your movie is more Mystic than mythic. You have to look for another  
8:10 PM

[Ti-S]: Please check in Ghana

8:11 PM

[To-S]: Attention!!! The following movies are rejected; (those I have received) **[Ben, Peggie, Martha, Jackie]** The following are successful: **[Benedette, Rosie, Pierette, Naggie]**

[Sg-T] Good evening sir, please sir I sent mine already waiting for feedback.

[Ti-S] Those who are still summarizing, please accelerate your work, so we see clearly how many will actually pass our test and how many will fail....

[Sg-T]: Good evening sir, I sent my work today and don't know if you received it.

[To-S]: "The legend of aguba" by [name] is NOT accepted. It deals with a typically universal themes with no mythical link. Please [Sona] I thought you ought to have realized this yourself in the light of All the criteria we listed. Please contact [Chris-the other Teacher] for a different movie....

[Sg-T]: Good evening Sir, while searching online, I saw the legend of aguba as a myth so I knew it was appropriate. Ok sir I will contact [Chris] as you said. Thank you, sir

8:50 PM

[Tr-S]: I am sorry. The summary by [Grace] is accepted!! sorry

[Sa-T]: Okay thank you, sir!

8:57 PM

April 4, 2020

[Sg-T] good evening sir. I send my work today and I don't know if you received it.

My name is [Jova]

8:11 PM

[Tr-S] [Jova] I will look at it tomorrow

9:21 PM

April 5, 2020

[Tc-S] [Jova] please I have not seen your summary. Could you kindly resend it? My email address: -----. Make sure you type it correctly

6:33 AM

[Tr-S] OK I got it, [Jova]

7:24 AM

### 5.3 Students' impressions of the WhatsApp forum class

We conducted a short survey after all the summaries had been submitted. We wanted to find out what the students thought they had accomplished in the WhatsApp forum task. Our general assessment on students' feedback on the work they did is rated high. Texts 1-5 below illustrate key learning claims students made and Fig 5 is a summary of those main learning aspects gleaned from the responses in 1-5, and in the Appendix. In texts 1-5, the underlined portions indicate main learning claims; and bold texts indicate time of the students' response.

[1.] **Good Moring sir**, it paved the way to opening my brain to be serious, sensitive, and research wise.

Again, I learned how to do a summary looking mostly at the important points. The movie summary brought out the me in me 😂😂 thank you sir. 🙏🙏 (Sg-T, Sf-T)

[2] I improved on my coherence and cohesion, make appropriate, concise and precise statement without missing out aspects of subject verb agreement and sentence structure. [...]. Though the exercise was quite challenging, it ended up to be very interesting. 🙏(Sf-T)

[3] Good evening Sir, this is [name]: What I learned from my movie was the fact that Greek mythology has a link with African mythology. In my movie "The Ancient sorcerer", I realized that the goddess of sorcery has a linked with the Greek goddess of witchcraft and necromancy(Hecate) and (Circe) the goddess of sorcery. As per the summary I was able to avoid wordiness and run on sentences which is common in the traditional class room (Sg-T, Sf-T)

[4] Good afternoon sir. So sorry phone got bad. I have learned a lot doing that summary. I work [sic] along with my dictionary so as to avoid wrong spellings. Though was not easy to watch the film cuz of blackouts but it was a wonderful experience cuz it entertains me a lot and keeps me busy. [name] (Sg-T, Sf-T)

[5] Good evening Sir: the project was of great importance because it broadens my skills on making a holistic summary. It is way better from that of traditional classroom because you strictly supervised it giving better outcomes (Sg-T, Sf-T)

These examples, and the time in which they came in show the degree of freedom with which participants in our forum interacted with one another. This quality of the class added a unique dimension of camaraderie to our WhatsApp “classroom”. Students literally “crossed boundaries” (i.e. writing short messages with emoticons to the teacher) in ways that they would not do in the physical classroom.

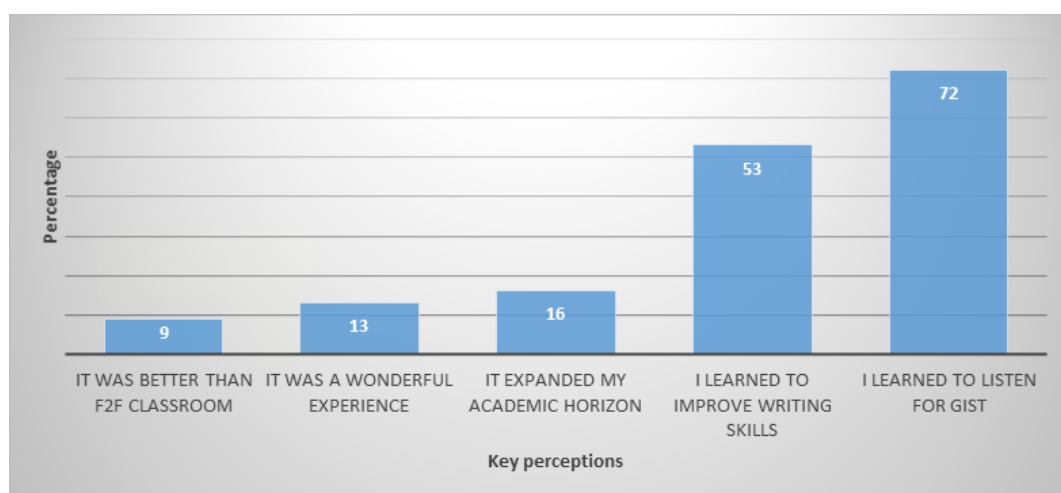


Figure 5. Summary of students’ key learning aspects of the WhatsApp forum project

The main skills summarized here illustrate the diverse views that students had of the WhatsApp forum. It is significant to note that the first two most cited skills (listening for gist and improving writing skills) that students said were of benefit to them are directly relevant to the task of holistic summary writing.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis in the preceding sections (5.1-5.3) shows the extent of student-teacher interaction in the WhatsApp forum, including what students said they learned. In this section, we reflect on what our forum achieved and could not achieve (6.1), and what we have learned from the whole experience (6.2).

### 6.1 What WhatsApp did and could not do in our class forum

Our experiment, though lasting only seven weeks, has illustrated that WhatsApp can actually be useful in mediating certain aspects of ELT, especially in the time of the coronavirus, when physical contact has to be kept to the minimum. Although we have always been aware that technology platforms work in this way (cf. Salaberry, 2001), the current pandemic has forced us to urgently devise alternative ways of delivery content. Naturally, the choice of a WhatsApp forum became very evident for us at ENS. First, as noted in Section 1, almost every student in our class has a smartphone with the user-friendly WhatsApp application installed in it. Second, ENS was not prepared for such an emergency. The other learning management systems (e.g. Moodle) that the school tried to put in place did not attract enough enthusiasts before the outbreak of Covid-19. Generally, we tend to judge the effectiveness of technology platforms by the extent to which they allow second language teachers to implement specific pedagogical tasks (Pederson, 1986). The positive students' feedback from our summary writing exercise has given us assurance that it is an effective communicative tool. Indeed, our colleagues at ENS also organized literature classes via WhatsApp.

The challenge for us, however, was assessment. It was not possible to conduct an assessment on WhatsApp as one would do with other learning management systems such as Moodle. The WhatsApp interface is not suitable to conduct an assessment with the guarantee that students would do independent work. Because of this limitation, the assessment component of our course was postponed. This was a general concern among the university authorities when they decided that minimum face-to-face encounter with students had to be arranged. Consequently, on June 1, 2020, our university opened its doors again officially and gave teachers three main objectives to accomplish in a face-to-face setting. First, teachers had to review all that they covered online with students in a face-to-face setting, but with small groups of students within a limited period (a maximum of 6 weeks). Second, teachers had to conduct a mid-term assessment. Lastly, they had to organize an end-of-course examination.

### 6.2 Lessons learned from our WhatsApp forum at ENS

For many years our university as a whole, and ENS in particular, have been involved in a number of learning technology projects. For example, between 2008 and 2012, our university benefited from a series of four German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)-sponsored e-learning projects, which trained many staff members and students in content development and structuring on the Moodle platform. Prior to the coronavirus, ENS had adopted a policy that required each department to develop at least two courses for online placement and delivery. However, many teachers felt they did not have the technical skills to implement it. With this new reality imposed by the pandemic, we are beginning to see a renewed interest in the way teachers, students, and administration are talking about the place of technology-based learning as an alternative, not only when safe distancing is required, but as a means to manage the large number of student enrolment in the university as a whole.

The coronavirus disrupted the usual face-to-face method of teaching in our university. The main question that remains to be further explored is one which has pre-occupied many researchers within and outside Cameroon: how effectively can new technologies as a whole be successfully integrated into most, if not all, university curricula? WhatsApp can be useful only in a limited way; it cannot be

used for assessment purposes. Moodle and MOOC have an in-built system for assessment but are very expensive for universities with limited funding like ours. Further, the technical aspects of accessing professional technological platforms present a daunting prospect for most teachers at ENS, who are often technologically not very savvy. Yet, it seems evident, and Covid-19 has brought out this reality, that the traditional face-to-face method is on the wane (Jin & Yan 2018). Feedback from our students (see Appendix) indicates the numerous advantages that students said our WhatsApp class offered them. Perhaps we should capitalize on this to push forward a more robust technology-based agenda for our university institutions.

## **7 Conclusion**

Our WhatsApp forum was created to conduct a specific language task, summary writing, with post-graduate students at ENS Yaoundé, who were forced to stay at home as a result of the outbreak of the coronavirus. The online teacher-student interaction lasted for 7 weeks, during which students received instructions on how to locate material online (movie), and write a summary on it. Findings indicate that the WhatsApp class was well received by students. Although class participation was full and intense, the possibility of extending such an activity to teaching other aspects of ELT (e.g. assessment) may be challenging. We conclude, however, that the time of technology has come; and it is not a question of whether or not we can implement our teaching agenda on the virtual space; rather it is an imperative as the coronavirus pandemic has illustrated. The requirement to maintain safe distancing forced us to take our writing class unto the WhatsApp platform, an exercise which we successfully conducted. Perhaps, it is time for the university to push forward a more aggressive agenda on this front than it has before. Teachers should become more creative and attentive to the learning opportunities that a crisis situation such as one created by the current pandemic can present.

## **Endnotes**

1. The expression “save the school year” came into popular use in the Cameroonian media several weeks after a lockdown on March 18, as government contemplated alternative methods of instruction with modern technologies. On June 1, 2020, the date of the official resumption of classes under strict safe distancing measures, the Prime Minister of Cameroon, Joseph Dion Ngute, referred to it in a speech to the nation (Cameroon Tribune No. 12104/8303-45thYear, p.2).
2. Many students in ENS de Yaoundé have a hard time paying the moderate annual fee of 50, 000 Frs CFA (USD 86). Despite the moderate annual school fee of 50, 000 Frs CFA (USD 86) that they are required to pay, government still give them allowance of up to the same amount. This allowance is referred to as an “Excellence Allowance”, and is generally given to everyone who successfully pass to the next class at the end of an academic year.
3. For the purpose of anonymity, all first names in the exchanges are pseudonyms.
4. Ur (2004) is a review of current research on interaction patterns in ELS contexts, and it is largely considered as authoritative.
5. I had a specific question for Bernice which I didn't want to ask in the group's platform: and so I contacted her through her personal number. When she had fixed the issue, I announced that her summary was successful.

## Appendix

No.	Feedback
1.	Good Moring sir, it paved the way to opening my brain to be serious, sensitive, and research wise. Again, I learned how to do a summary looking mostly at the important points. The movie summary brought out the me in me 😂😂 thank you sir. 🙏🙏
2.	Good afternoon sir. So sorry phone got bad. I have learned a lot doing that summary. I work along with my dictionary so as to avoid wrong spellings. Though was not easy to watch the film cuz of blackouts but it was a wonderful experience cuz it entertains me a lot and keeps me busy. [name]
3.	Hello sir, this is [name]... What I learnt from the task is being able to create and use words... using the appropriate and relevant words... Also, I learnt how to summarise voluminous works and improve on my writing skills which is what most people find difficult... The movie I summarises (sic) being a Yoruba Epic, gave me an insight to the Yoruba culture and tradition...
4.	Summarizing a movie has helped me to learn how to filter main ideas from details, identify key points, understand themes, use my own words and organize my work in such a way that one can understand the storyline even without watching the movie
5.	Good afternoon sir, this is [name] I learned that with summary writing, one is expected to highlight only important aspects in a text, which makes meaning as far as the storyline is concern, taking into consideration language which should be strictly academic.
6.	I also learnt how to bring the many different episodes of a film together and come out with a short summary that will express all the main ideas in the whole film so that one can read and understand. OK 😊😊👍
7.	What impacted me most while doing the task was my ability of being creative, being able to select the appropriate words and relevant materials to come out with the writing. Also, what I learned from the task is that writing is a skill that needs a lot of practice, this practice permits an individual to condense any work no matter how large or voluminous it is into few pages. I am sorry for the lateness sir 🙏.
8.	Actually sir, as a result of the work given us to make summaries on African films, I have been able to learn how to write a short but apt and vivid summary which is an indication that I can do same with books after reading them.
9.	Good afternoon sir. [name]. Sir I wish to first of all appreciate your effort in giving us this task. Sir this summary helped me a lot because I learned that writing the movie summary was not just looking for an interesting movie and writing about but it was also academic especially when we related it to Greek mythology.
10.	In my opinion I think summary writing to me was a bit challenging because I had to stay very focus on the movie, taking into consideration every little event and then presenting it in a holistic manner.
11.	Good afternoon sir. I learned how to summarize a movie .I watch movies and narrate orally to people but this time I had to write it down, which was a good experience.
12.	From the summary I did, I realized that, summarizing a movie is all about the important challenges and not paraphrasing the actor's words in a movie.

13.	I improved on my coherence and cohesion, make appropriate, concise and precise statement without missing out aspects of subject verb agreement and sentence structure. [...]. Though the exercise was quite challenging, it ended up to be very interesting. 🙏
14.	Good evening Sir: the project was of great importance because it broaden [sic] my skills on making a holistic summary. It is way better from that of traditional classroom because you strictly supervised it giving better outcomes.
15.	Good evening Sir, this is [name]: What I learned from my movie was the fact that Greek mythology has a link with African mythology. In my movie "The Ancient sorcerer", I realized that the goddess of sorcery has a linked with the Greek goddess of witchcraft and necromancy(Hecate) and (Circe) the goddess of sorcery. As per the summary I was able to avoid wordiness and run on sentences which is common in the traditional class room.
16.	Good morning, sir: think I learned how to watch a movie, and reproduce it in the form of a write up. Although I found the process challenging, it was as well interesting. I think this was better than what will have obtained in an ordinary class context, because, the exercise was a practical kind of thing, and that is what made the whole stuff interesting.
17.	Also , I found it challenging because this was the very first time of my life that I encountered such a method of teaching.
18.	Good evening professor: Concerning my personal experience with our previous summary writing, it will be healthy to say that the instructions and format we received from you were of great help for the proper realization of the task. The sufficient time granted, and distant execution of the task also made me autonomously try to put in the best of myself as far as summary writing is concerned. In a nut shell, I doubt if the result would have been that successful in a face-to-face class. Thanks again, sir. 🙏
19.	Good morning sir: I learned how to develop my summary on my own using my own words without the help of internet resources. This helped me in that it boosts my confidence for i could do any piece of work without necessarily going online for materials but develop my own knowledge. Again, i learn that when summarizing it is important to read the whole work first then paraphrase in your own words taking into consideration key words use.
20.	Good morning sir. What I noticed doing this task of movie summary was that only the key facts of the movie was to be summarized. This was quite different from the normal way I used to summarize a novel, so I learned another way of doing summaries in a more efficient way. Thank you sir for giving us the opportunity to grow in this domain
21.	It was of great importance because it widened my mind on what a good summary should look like is, it should be concise, accurate and objective and with this I was able to come up with a holistic summary which is not the case in the traditional class room.
22.	Good morning sir/ This exercise of summary writing has done much positive Impact in my way of writing summary in that, I have understood that writing a good summary does not require that one gives a line to line explanation of the movie or the text we are summarizing, but to tell the story the way we understand it in our own words.



23.	Good morning sir. As I wrote those summaries, I learned how to make good use of word choice in relation to my audience. I equally learned accurate academic writing_ which entails coherence and cohesion.
24.	And I also think summary writing is better than a face to face traditional classroom because, with a summary, one can edit by adding what is relevant or subtracting what is irrelevant while with face to face, editing is not possible.

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**Daniel A. Nkemleke** is professor in English language and linguistics and teacher trainer in the Department of English at the Ecole normale supérieure, University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon. He has taught English language courses and supervised over 150 pre-service teachers' end-of-course dissertations since 2000. His main research interest is compilation of language databases, and analyzing and comparing these corpora for teaching academic writing at tertiary level.

***Linda Tume Leinyuy*** is an MA student in English at the University of Yaoundé 1, and a research assistant in the Department of English at ENS de Yaoundé. She has taught English to young adults for many years and participated in workshops on language teaching in collaboration with the Cameroon English language teacher association research group.