

USING MOBILE MESSENGER APPS TO TEACH ENGLISH REMOTELY

Amy Lightfoot



Introduction

Using a mobile messenger app such as WhatsApp is one way to support the remote learning of English and other subjects. This is especially useful when learners or teachers can only use the internet on their mobile phones or have limited data. There are a variety of ways that these apps can be used. You will need to think about the situation that most of your students are in and then design your approach and activities.

Getting started

- Find out how many of your learners you can reach using the messenger app you want to use. Younger learners should use a phone belonging to their parents or caregivers. You will need to ask their permission to use their phone number to add them to a class group.
- You can have one group set up for the whole class which is 'broadcast only' – this means only you (the group administrator) can send messages. Once you've set up the group, go to 'Group settings' and choose 'Only admins' under 'Send messages'. Use this group to share important information with the whole class and their parents when you don't need them to respond.
- You can also create separate groups within the class, perhaps up to ten students in each one. This will make the conversations easier to manage.
- Planning is key. Plan a programme of work for your students that you can deliver by phone. Try to plan a week of lessons or content at a time. Write down what you want your students to have learned by the end of the week.

Providing input

- You can send a short video to say hello to your learners and tell them the plan for the next few days, each week. You can also send your message as text for learners with limited data.
- It's easy to share new vocabulary items. Try sharing a few words each day. You can share photos of objects or drawings to explain the words. You can record yourself saying the words and send the audio file.
- You can draw out diagrams or what you might show on the board in the classroom on a piece of paper. Take a photo of it and send it to the group – it might be easier to do that sometimes than writing information out as a text message.
- Share short poems as text or audio files. Introduce new vocabulary. Send some questions for the learners to answer about the poem.

Setting practice tasks and activities

- Tasks can be based around the textbook, if you're sure all your learners have one at home, or they can be stand-alone but linked to the curriculum.
- A daily task or challenge can keep learners practising their English skills regularly. Be clear about exactly what language or skill they are learning or practising with each task.
- You can do text-only quizzes asking the learners to answer questions, match definitions or halves of sentences, or complete gaps in a short text.
- If your students can get online easily, you can send links to other content online via the group chat. Check the links carefully to avoid sharing inappropriate content.
- Try to make use of the learners' own environments. For example, *Find five things in your house that begin with 'S'*, or more challenging, *Find one thing for each letter of the alphabet in your house or neighbourhood*. They can also do interviews with family members using their home language and then report back in English or write stories for younger siblings.

Receiving work from students and giving feedback

- Set tasks for learners to do whenever they can but make yourself available at specific times each day to answer questions. This also helps parents know when their kids need to use their phones.
- Even though they're receiving the input on a mobile, ask your learners to have one notebook where they do all the work you give them. This will help them to review the language they're learning.
- Depending on the task, learners might send you their work using text, an audio file or a photo of work they have done.
- Don't forget to ask your learners and parents for feedback on your teaching – they might have some good ideas for how they can keep learning remotely, with your support.

Things to consider

- **Permission and privacy:** It's not recommended for teachers to connect directly with younger learners on their mobile phones. You will need to get permission from their parents or caregivers to set up the groups.
- **Data usage:** Some people won't have a lot of data available for the lesson content. Think about how you can share content using only text or small files.
- **Group rules:** Your class' first task can be to agree rules for the group using modals *must*, *mustn't*, *should*, etc.

Useful links

- A blog on a teacher's experience of using WhatsApp: <https://tinyurl.com/y7kvxubq>
- A blog on using WhatsApp to support teacher development: <https://tinyurl.com/ybr7hp7v>