N°17, 2ème Semestre - Décembre 2024

# Remote Professional Development via WhatsApp: A Case Study of EFL Teachers in West Africa

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**Abstract -** This study examines WhatsApp access, use, and outcomes for teachers of English professional education in Benin Republic, West Africa. We sent a questionnaire to three hundred (300) EFL teachers and randomly interviewed twenty (20) participant teachers. The results reveal many challenges and opportunities in using WhatApp for participants' professional development. Some of the challenges are lack of internet connectivity and its cost, information storage, enrollment limitation, indiscipline, irrelevant contents, off-topic issues, and digital literacy. The researcher suggests a series of workshops to sensitise and train teachers on the use of WhatsApp chats for professional development and the involvement of governmental bodies to provide significant levels of support to reduce connectivity cost for educational purposes.

**Keywords**: EFL, WhatsApp, Professional Development, Digital Literacy

### INTRODUCTION

Teacher training and education have been facing some challenges in the past decade in Benin Republic. There is a shortage of personnel with a deficit of professional training to teach whereas the student population is increasing each year. Most teachers hired every year do not receive any initial training before entering the job. The national professional development programs are rare, mostly irrelevant and unfit to the real context (Lanmantchion, 2016). There is not only a strain on training pre-service teachers, but also there exists very little in the way of ongoing development opportunities for those teachers who have been through the State training system, or who have entered the profession without training. Opportunities to engage in professional development vary significantly according to a teacher's geographic location, with the more remote and rural areas often having no or very few opportunities available (Motteram et al., 2019). It appears that a high number of instructors require professional development. Identifying professional development models that result in accelerated professional development is a pressing educational concern (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Teachers' professional development is essential in this era of technology to help students meet new skills and standards. Teachers must teach effectively and equip students with 21st-century skills. One way to face the situation successfully is to use technology for teachers' professional training and



education. The present study is an investigation on how English language teachers in Benin Republic use WhatsApp in supporting their professional development. As the largest messaging platform, WhatsApp has become the most used and useful application all around the world, especially in West Africa. Groups of people only need an internet connection (Wi-Fi or cellular network) and smart phones to instantly share unlimited text messages, voice notes, voice calls, video conferences, and files. WhatsApp came into being in 2009 and is reported to have more than 1.5 billion users in over 180 countries in 2019. (Motteram & Dawson, 2020) One of Android's most downloaded applications in combination with the widely reported statistics about mobile use in the developing world (Porter et al., 2016; Gao & Zhang, 2020.), WhatsApp seems, therefore, a good starting point as an alternative method of improving teachers' training and professional development. This study, which assesses the level of practice and experiences in using WhatsApp in supporting teachers' professional development in Benin Republic, is structured around five points: the literature review; the objectives; the methodology; the results/discussion; and the conclusion.

### 1. Review of the Scholarship

Language teaching experts and researchers believe that ongoing professional development is essential, especially in today's world of continually changing technology (Chisman & Grandall, 2007). We can do nothing successfully without individual and collective professional development activities. However, the structures and supports needed to sustain teachers' learning and change fall short. Sauer (2016) shows that current work conditions make it almost impossible for people to complete professional tasks on their own. Allen and Negueruela-Azarola (2010: 134) further explain that "practitioners working with a group of colleagues have the benefit of immediate feedback on their ideas from peers. Learning is enriched as group members draw on the skills and perspectives each brings." Cooperative work deserves special attention in schools for it is easy for schools to become isolationist, with teachers working in the four walls of their classrooms and failing to interact with their peers in addressing students' learning. WhatsApp can be an excellent tool to cooperate and reduce the gaps between trained and untrained teachers. It can be used for in-service training and professional development. If WhatsApp is well controlled and well managed, it can be beneficial for teaching-learning and teachers' education. However, poorly handled, it becomes chaotic (Motteram et al., 2020; Lee & Lee 2020). High tech tools like video conferencing applications are attractive; however, they need higher bandwidth than media tools like WhatsApp (Motteram, 2019). While using the video conferencing tool Zoom is less successful on many occasions



(Motteram, 2020), WhatsApp and similar multimodal devices – such as WeChat, Viber or Telegram - are able to handle text, pictures, sound files and video as well as voice calls. In low-resource and fragile contexts, teachers are often the most valuable resources available to students, and their professional development proves an essential and integral part of successful educational systems (Borg, 2015; Jin & Myrick 2019). Collaboration among teachers is vital to promote their development. Teachers need to reflect on their current teaching practices to identify students' problems. Darling-Hammond and his team (2009) found that in schools where teachers form active learning communities, students' achievement increased significantly. Sharing learning experiences with other colleagues and applying them work well as opposed to just having theoretical knowledge (Ur, 2002: 34). Moram (2020) identifies the potentials for WhatsApp groups to contribute to the professional development of teachers in various ways: sharing of teaching resources and materials; discussions about different aspects of teaching and learning; and raising awareness about other professional development events that teachers might like to be involved in. Moram (2020) and Smith & Davenport (2021) equally hold that by allowing teachers to belong to a "community of practice" around WhatsApp, they are being given tools that might enable them to exercise their agency and take responsibility for their own professional development. However, the study nuances that the teachers need to value these opportunities as something necessary for their own lives and wellbeing. Vieira (2017) addresses the need to change mindsets, and the need for teachers to have a sense of responsibility to make the group work and a commitment to each other. However, there are context-related challenges that might limit the teachers' agency and choice: access to the network all the time, lack of electricity, and the cost of technology, etc. These challenges may cause interest in WhatsApp groups to wane, and teachers might get frustrated and leave. One way to counteract this, as González (2014) suggests, is to raise awareness of the need for flexibility during the initial workshop. This literature review proposes that WhatsApp could be an effective and practical tool for enhancing teacher professional development in Benin Republic, provided that the challenges of access and engagement are addressed, and that teachers are encouraged to take ownership of their learning process. The literature review in this context highlights the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers, particularly in the context of using technology for collaborative learning and growth. When applied to Benin, this review aims to:

# 2. Methodology



## 2.1. Aims and Research Questions

This study aims to explore at what modalities low-tech, low-cost, readily available forms of technology might contribute to language teachers' development in challenging contexts. The investigation was to study English language teachers' experiences and challenges relating to the use of WhatsApp for professional development in Benin Republic. To achieve the purpose, we used the following three research questions:

Research question one: What are the teachers' characteristics in the context under investigation?

Research question two: What forms of practice emerge from the use of WhatsApp and how is teachers' development manifested through the WhatsApp chats in the context under investigation?

Research question three: What are the challenges in using WhatsApp for teachers' professional development?

## 2.2. Participants and Instruments

Three hundred (300) English language teachers were selected to participate in this study. The language teachers were all from the five Benin National Teachers of English Association (BNTEA) branches: BNTEA Cotonou, BNTEA Houéyogbé, BNTEA Ouidah, BNTEA Parakou and BNTEA Porto-Novo. We designed a questionnaire to collect background information from the three hundred (300) teachers. We adopted this procedure firstly to understand more about the English language teachers themselves (teaching experience, the age and level of their learners, and their employment situation). Then, we aimed at understanding the types of technology available to them personally and in their schools, the way they connect to the internet and the reliability of that connection. We wanted to gauge their interest in online teachers' development activities and to discover the sorts of areas they would like to explore. We designed an interview schedule for twenty (20) teachers among the three hundred (300) participants who belong to a WhatsApp group. From these participants, we can learn about the setting up of WhatsApp groups for professional development and discover how these WhatsApp groups have fashioned their professional development activities and the challenges and opportunities that have emerged from them.

### 3. Results

This section provides the outcomes of the study. The first part highlights general information about EFL teachers' characteristics in the sampled regions, and the



rest displays the answers to the questionnaire as well as the interview. The answers were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

# 3.1. Teacher Respondents' Characteristics in the Context under Investigation

The gathering of background information seeks to shed more light on the teaching context of the English language teachers in the different branches and their access to different types of technology and the internet. Apprehending the geographical, sociological, material and linguistic contexts is essential to this study. The questionnaire enabled us to apprehend the school and classroom teaching and learning contexts more fully. There were many similarities between the five branches in terms of the teaching context: overcrowded classrooms and a general lack of resources. However, there also seemed to be a difference in conditions within each branch. A participant's following report on contextrelated challenges is indicative: "The teaching most often takes place in a traditional classroom sitting arrangement with a chalkboard in front of learners. My school is located in a rural area with no electricity, and thus the school has very limited facilities. Most of the work is manual." A lower percentage of the participants reported never participating in any professional development activities. Having access to professional development activities has been unevenly distributed among teachers in the sampled regions. In sum, access to professional learning is still relatively rare, and participant teachers hardly have any access to regular opportunities. The findings show the existence of only a small number of specialised teachers in the sampled regions. These data raise the challenges for increasing and improving the quality of the teaching force.

Another aim of the study was to explore the use of low-tech forms of technology for EFL teachers' development. It was essential to understand the type of access teachers had to the internet, how they accessed it and the equipment they had. The following table shows the number of teachers' personal access to technology.

Table. showing EFL teachers access to technology

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Branches	<b>Participants</b>	Mobile phone	Laptop	Tablet	Desktop
BNTEA Cotonou	100	94	11	2	13
BNTEA Lokossa	50	41	2	0	1
BNTEA Ouidah	50	48	2	0	1
BNTEA Parakou	50	42	4	4	6
BNTEA Porto Novo	50	49	9	7	8

Visibly, mobile phone remains the most accessible and frequently owned technology for teachers in the context under investigation. Mobile data is the most frequent way of connecting to the internet (two hundred seventy four – 274 – out of three hundred – 300 – in the study) while connecting to Wi-Fi at home is



the least common method. Data connection was deemed reliable by fifty-two per cent (52%) of the respondents, with thirty-one per cent (31%) saying that it was not reliable. When asked if they would like to take part in professional development activities via WhatsApp chats, two hundred seventy-one (271) teachers said "yes." There is no significant difference in the teachers' opinion on teachers' development via WhatsApp. The majority admits that nothing can be successfully done without professional development. As one of the respondents stated:

"In one way or other, professional development via WhatsApp is helpful in the sense that it will provide more opportunities for teachers' development in our challenging context and help the teacher to implement easily and effectively new strategies."

This statement is backed up by another respondent's response:

"Teachers who will work for their professional development via WhatsApp chats will surely become good teachers, and good teachers make good learners."

# 3.2. Forms of Practice and Teacher's Development Manifestations through WhatsApp Chats

Many types of WhatsApp groups were developed for training activities and sharing events for English language teaching in the context under investigation. The number of WhatsApp groups each teacher belongs to range from twenty-two (22) to twenty-six (26). They are created either for teachers or for students. These groups primarily seek to share teaching resources and information, discuss teaching challenges, design examination tests, exchange ideas on a variety of topics, ask for help in designing a lesson plan, prepare a test, get model answers and listening texts. Additionally, these groups design materials collaboratively, practise language, run training/development sessions, share training/development materials, and act as a forum for debate. One of the respondents claimed:

"Our WhatsApp group is used, on the one hand, to announce events and scholarship opportunities. On the other hand, the group is used to share administrative documents, lesson plans, demo lessons, teaching materials, and event reminding."

For teacher respondents, WhatsApp constitutes an excellent learning tool. Some respondents asserted that WhatsApp is used to help grow professionally and work collaboratively. In that connection, another respondent declared:

"It is awesome and fantastic to share our experiences to build relationships, and it is also good to improve our teaching practices in different ways."

In the context under investigation, there exists a particularly successful WhatsApp group, "English Workshop" with strong networking and with many international experts who share experience and knowledge. The group has about



three hundred and forty-six (346) participants from inside and outside of the country. The primary purposes of this WhatsApp group are conducting professional development activities and sharing educational resources as well as useful links. On most of weekdays, this group organises training for teachers. A topic of interest to the teachers is chosen with a specialist identified to present it. Additionally, there exist twenty-one (21) other local WhatsApp groups composed of an average of fifty (50) participants. These local WhatsApp groups share news and lesson plans, in addition to elaborating standard tests and assessments. It is undeniable that WhatsApp group participants benefit from timely and appropriate interventions by their peers. The importance of learning from peers is as significant as formal instruction. Forging relationships and participating in a learning community is vital to their growth. Thus, there is a need for a learning community in which trust and good-humoured playfulness are paramount. Professional groups - WhatsApp groups and special interest groups – are important to offering psychological support, in sharing information and in developing solidarity.

# 3.3. Barriers in Using WhatsApp for Teachers' Development in the Context under Investigation

Even though WhatsApp is an ideal tool for professional development activities, it is also challenging for teachers. These challenges have different dimensions, including managerial, technical, technological, motivational, economic, political and time-related challenges.

### 3.3.1. Managerial Challenges

A WhatsApp group comprises the "host," the initiator of the group who thought of setting it up for a given activity. Moreover, there are the "guests," the users who will take part in the activities of the group. Besides setting up a group, the host has to keep the guests engaged and active through meaningful and motivational posts that meet guests' interests. This responsibility also includes providing support and monitoring of the group. However, the study finds that many hosts failed to maintain and manage their WhatsApp groups. Accordingly, the guests are left idle, with many guests dropping out. Another managerial issue is the transfer of ownership from the host to the guests to form a community of practice. One implication is to transfer professional development ownership to the teachers. The teachers would become more autonomous while having access to a wide range of resources and more experienced practitioners. However, some hosts do not show flexibility in the groups in their responses and feedback to other participants, leaving the impression that the group is someone's personal property. The approach where one takes the lead is likely to inhibit the



participants' contribution if their self-esteem is not upheld. It is recommended that the approach for monitoring an online community be a democratic rather than an autocratic one. In fact, the guests face different challenges, sometimes depending on their characteristics. The difficulties of meeting the expectations of teacher's autonomy include the ability to use the multimodal features of WhatsApp to solve challenges together, collaborate on activities, research and share useful and meaningful information, engage with the rest of the community, and contribute in building a knowledge base of ELT in the country.

# 3.3.2. Technological and Technical Challenges

Even though WhatsApp does not require sophisticated technical skills, the ability to install and use the application constitutes an issue. In the context under investigation, English teachers are not sufficiently prepared to meet the required technical standard skills for WhatsApp chats. The difficulty lies in teachers who struggle to gain technological fluency. Many identified barriers continue to prevail in the study, not for lack of teachers' trying but because of the overwhelming nature of technology. The study also shows that many respondents are often resistant to technology because they do not see it as part of their prime responsibilities. Time allotted for mobile phones and computers means learning how to use a function with little or no concrete connection to professional development activities. Some of the respondents are reluctant to use WhatsApp and others are against social media and do not want to join any WhatsApp group. Although they are computer literate, they do not want to join any WhatsApp group because of an unfortunate event they experienced via social media.

Apart from the information storage and the enrollment limitation, reliable connectivity remains another technical challenge. While city residents have access to a much better internet connection, rural area residents are poorly served. In any case and regardless of one's place of residence, the connection cost is expensive for the teacher's meager income. Many teachers who have smart phones and would love to be active in the groups cannot afford the cost of mobile data. As a result, some are less active than others. Furthermore, the network saturation and bandwidth in urban areas and the non-coverage of some remote villages make the use of WhatsApp very challenging for many informants.

### 3.3.3. Motivational Challenges

The study reveals that the importance of delivering professional development that is directly relevant to teachers was another issue. One of the challenges was to get people to understand that the group is a professional one. Some guest teachers posted jokes and political propaganda. Indeed, a growing body of



literature has focused on the influence that teachers' motivations, interests, and prior knowledge have in determining the effect of a given professional development programme on the quality of teachers' instruction. Teachers are more likely to build on what they learn from professional development experiences when their existing knowledge and priorities are acknowledged and made central to the learning process. Researchers working specifically in the educational technology field have emphasised similar issues concerning technology-focused professional development. Technology-related professional development must engage with and build on teachers' own interests (Riel and Becker, 2000).

# 3.3.4. Economic and Political Challenges

Access to mobile broadband and cost are still serious challenges. A mobile handset and 500MB of data costs 10% of the average monthly income of an teacher (Straumsheim, 2016). This reality affects Communication has been identified as one of the 21st-century skills for meeting many of the development imperatives expressed in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for Africa. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) holds the potential to drive development and transform teachers' professional development. However, ICT policies and systems that may promote this growth are not in line with teachers' economic realities. There are still some teachers who do not possess a mobile device. Furthermore, there are some regions lacking electricity, a crucial component in ICT access. Within these regions, the use of technology mediated learning that allows for improved learning and additional access to higher education is limited.

### 3.3.5. Time Challenges

Another major challenge is time factor. Many participants see WhatsApp as a time-consuming activity. This makes it hard for teachers to be fully engaged in the professional WhatsApp group, forcing many of them to drop out. Zinsou, one of the informants, declared:

"I prefer face-to-face collaboration than wasting my time by punching fingers over a glass screen that takes the non-verbal aspect of communication away and replaces emotions with phony emoticons where a person types ten smileys even though they might be frowning."

Furthermore, another challenge was to agree on a time to discuss teachers' professional development in the group. The difference with time zone with some guest speakers makes it very hard for local teachers to learn from and share with international teachers.



# 4. Discussion and Suggestions:

The use of WhatsApp has strengthened the relationships between EFL teachers, moving them from isolation to a supported community of English teachers seeking to improve their classroom practices in the context under investigation. Sharing resources and spreading information have been significant activities. Another innovation is the integration of a "socio affective" dimension to professional development (Jones & Green 2020). The feeling of belonging to a community tearing down the barriers that used to isolate the English teacher, in particular those working in remote cities, is rewarding. Daily social and professional interactions with other teachers and community leaders are visible. These interactions have developed a sense of belonging to a community (Moram & Dawson, 2020), allowing teachers to identify models, to whom they ask for help or mentoring when needed. The successful use of WhatsApp lies in its innovative approach to teachers' development. The WhatsApp communities have succeeded in bringing the teachers together to express their own needs. In the group formed by the National Teacher Association, the teachers are sharing experiences and resources available in other online forums. Equally, the group has been instrumental in building a large community of English teachers, organising events like workshops and conferences (MacKinnon & Lacombe-Duncan, 2021). Information can reach more people in contexts where people do not have access to emails or have low skills in technologies. The platform has been used to discuss and take ground-breaking decisions when there is no opportunity for face-to-face meeting.

Besides the successes of this experience, some challenges need to be considered as well. There is a need to consider the moderators' workloads and establish realistic expectations for the groups, mainly where internet connections are sporadic, and no electricity exists. A staggering number of previous studies has found that specific structural, program-level characteristics are essential to the creation of a successful teachers' professional development group. Equally, a growing body of literature has established that individual-level characteristics of the teachers are crucial in determining the success of such groups. This study suggests that WhatsApp has a vital role in the professional development of teachers in more remote and challenging contexts. The study offers eight elements of active professional development through WhatsApp chats: format, duration, collective participation, inclusiveness, opportunities, content focus, and coherence, incentives and ongoing learning. The following suggestions are made in light of the outcomes of the study:

- It is important to find local skilled colleagues who work in and understand the local context and the needs and mindsets of the teachers in order to



build a professional development WhatsApp group that is relevant to local needs.

- It is necessary to help teachers working in remote and rural communities where access to the internet is more sporadic, to purchase some mobile data for the first few months. That could increase their access to the group and enable them to grasp the potential of the group for their professional development. It might encourage continued uptake.
- It is important to set up rules and a strict code of discipline and enforce them.
- It is necessary to teach the potential members how to use WhatsApp through trainings, workshops and conferences.
- It is important to encourage teachers to be passionate about their own professional developments because this passion can energise them to manage the group.
- Monitoring an online community should take a democratic rather than an autocratic model of approach.
- It is important to vary activities and involve governmentl bodies such as Ministries of Education, Telecommunication Regulation Authorities, to provide significant levels of support to reduce connectivity cost for educational purposes.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has significantly illuminated WhatsApp's influential role in enhancing Teachers of English professional development in Benin Republic. The combination of the literature review and the implementation of the questionnaire and interview has shown technology innovations have opened up how teachers can network and improve their teaching so as to impact their students better. The integration of WhatsApp into professional development activities offers teachers not only a medium for creative expression but also a supportive community that enhances their psychological well-being. This dual benefit is particularly pertinent in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), where WhatsApp has shown potential to transcend traditional professional development methods by facilitating more dynamic, interactive, and culturally diverse professional learning experiences. WhatsApp can be instrumental in reducing the gaps between trained and untrained teachers. It can be used for teachers' professional development and offer engaging activities and useful feedback and support to teachers. Creating a space and time for reflection is necessary for language teachers, if teachers are to think in a real way about what they do. If WhatsApp is well controlled and well managed, it will be beneficial for teaching-learning



and teachers' education. However, it needs to be set up, well managed and hosts need to devote a lot of time to it to make it successful.

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