

***Kulwap*: The EFL Learners' Perspectives on the Online English Course  
Conducted through WhatsApp Group Interactions**

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Abstract

This study aims at highlighting the EFL learners' perspectives on *Kulwap*–online English course conducted through WhatsApp Group Interactions. This is an exploratory research project employing a qualitative method. The data of the study were gained through an informal semi-structured interview and students' written testimonies. The research findings show that conducting an English online course through *kulwap* proposes advantages as well as challenges that must be considered for the future instructional process. The benefits of *Kulwap* include the accessibility, simplicity, convenience, and flexibility the students got during the instructional process if the English course. On the other hand, the challenges faced by the students regarding the online course through *Kulwap* cover the problems of internet connectivity, and other technical things including the eye strain, students' lack of motivation, and limited response from the lecturer during the online instructional process.

**Keywords:** online learning, mobile learning, *kulwap* (course conducted through WhatsApp group interactions).

## A. Introduction

The pandemic of Covid-19 happening all around the world affects all aspects of life. It has changed the human ways of carrying out everyday activities. Most of the countries have made regulations related to the ways of reducing the spread and the transmission of the epidemic. Lockdown, for instance, is implemented in plenty of territories. Similarly, large-scale social distancing is massively adopted in many areas, particularly in Indonesia. Officially, they have consequences on how people act in carrying their daily routines. ‘Work from Home’, for instance, is a movement of which people do all activities without going to the office and meeting colleagues physically. It is applied in the education field as well.

As schools or colleges were recently closed and more and more people stay at home, online learning seems to be growing exponentially. It is accomplished as the solution since the learning process must go on but people must limit physical interactions. The courses are not carried out in a classroom or face to face meeting but virtually instead. Thus, suitable online learning strategies are necessary for this current situation.

As happened in Nahdatul Ulama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung, Central Java), all the instructional processes carried out through the online system. It is implemented based on the regulation issued by the Indonesian Government through the Decree of Education and Culture Minister (2020). Here, the authority of how to conduct an online course was given entirely for each lecturer by considering various conditions one of which is the ability of students to access the applications used. It was found that the applications used include zoom, Google classroom, YouTube, and ‘*kulwap: kuliah whatsapp*’ (course conducted through WhatsApp group interactions).

Among the applications used by the lecturers of STAINU Temanggung, it was then identified that the most wanted tool to join the online course selected by the students is through mobile learning, especially through *Kulwap*. The reason is that mobile learning as one of the online learning forms integrating mobile technology that enables learning to be done without limits. It is considered the best way since mobile learning able to be conducted anywhere, anytime, and in any way (according to the context of learning). More specifically, *kulwap:*

*kuliahwhatsapp* (course conducted through WhatsApp group interactions) is regarded as the best way to deliver online learning. It is also based on the characteristics, needs/desires of students. It is proved by the result of the survey that 52% of the respondents (114 students) as the representatives of STAINU Temanggung students chose *kulwap*. The rest numbers are 25%, 12 %, 1%, and 10 % orderly for Google Classroom, Zoom, Youtube, and other options.

The results of the above survey then floored to the students taking Intermediate level of English Course (56 students altogether). It is a subject that belongs to the General course carried out in the even semester of 2019/2020 academic year. Unbelievably, all of them (100%) chose *Kulwap* as well to conduct the English class. They said that it is affordable and easy to use. This offer is also intended that the students have a chance to choose the easiest way to have online courses as it is considered that not all students have the same conditions either the financial supports, internet access, or even the geographical situation.

Quick feedback on the students' intention then accomplished. The English online course then finally done through *Kulwap*. Based on the students' points of view, it brings some advantages that can be attained, such as low cost of bandwidth and accessible even in remote areas. On the other hand, there are always things to be considered as it is not always well done by using *Kulwap*. Thus, this present paper highlights some points of the students' perceptions, in detail, of the process of online English Course using *Kulwap*.

## **B. Literature Review**

### **1. Online learning**

Stern (n.d) states that online learning is just one type of "distance learning" – the umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a traditional classroom which has a long history and has several types available today. They include correspondence courses (conducted through regular mail with little interaction), telecourses (delivered via radio or television broadcast), CD-ROM courses (interactions through static computer content), online learning (internet-based courses), and mobile learning (utilizing devices such as cellular phones, PDAs, and digital audio players namely iPods, MP3 players, etc.). Similarly, based on the study of Institute of Educational Sciences

(2014), distance educations are courses that are credit-granting, technology-delivered, have either the instructor in a different location than the students and/or have the course content developed in, or delivered from, a different location than that of the students. Online learning also refers to instructional environments supported by the internet (Stern, J. n.d).

Online learning can be fully-online or blended with face-to-face interactions (Bakia, 2012; Nguyen, 2015). Fully online learning is a form of distance education in which all instruction and assessment are carried out using online, internet-based delivery (Picciano and Seaman: 2009). On the other hand, blended learning (also called hybrid learning) allows students to receive significant portions of instruction through both face-to-face and online means (Graham, Allen, and Ure, 2005; Watson et al.: 2010). Additionally, Gilbert (2015) gives a more type of online learning besides those former two which are traditional course using web-based supplements that uses online technology as a medium for presenting supplemental material for traditional classroom study.

The reason for considering using online learning is due to its benefits. In a study conducted by Dhull&Sakshi (2017) some advantages include: accessibility (students can learn from anywhere), personalised learning (determine and process the learning style, content, aim, current knowledge and individual skill), develops cognitive abilities (students of e-learning program had higher achievement levels than their counterparts), cost-effectiveness (less money is spent in travelling and in buying books or spending money in college context), promotes research (students are excited to publish their work when they produce something of extremely high quality), basic computer skills (have an opportunity to gain technical skills in using Information Communication Technology(ICT)), equal opportunity to all (students are not treated differently), self-pacing (students are free to complete the course work according to their own will and they can take as much time as he requires without being termed as slow by the peers), and globalization (wherein students share ideas and resources, access information about current events and historical archives, interact with experts, and use online databases). Stern (n.d), in the same way, promotes some advantages of online learning namely: convenience (access from any online computer; accommodates busy schedules), enhanced learning (more meaningful discussions), leveling of the

playing field (students can take more time to think and reflect before communicating), interaction (a greater sense of connectedness), innovative teaching (address different learning styles), improved administration (ability to document and record online interactions), savings (accommodate more students), maximize physical resources (limited campus infrastructure), outreach (give students options).

The disadvantages of online learning, on the other hand, cover some aspects such as poor communication (the opportunity to have face to face interaction with the teacher), feeling isolated, lack of motivation (easily get distracted towards any other thing), lack of funds (connectivity costs which may later cause barriers to online learning), lack of quality (don't take their lesson preparations as seriously as they could, and this lack of commitment surely has a profound and negative effect on the quality of online learning), poor accessibility in remote areas (hardware, software, and connectivity facilities are pre-requisites that enable online teaching and learning. In the absence of any one of these, online learning cannot achieve its objective (Traxler, 2005)

## **2. Mobile learning**

The mobile learning concept is gaining popularity because it enables learning across multiple contexts and disciplines by using portable mobile devices (Li, 2017). As a means of mobile learning, mobile devices are currently the most useful tools in the ICT world. They have significantly changed in recent years. Their current excessive and broaden functions which are more than just by their primary purpose enabling users to communicate through voice, but further to play the role of a resourceful personal computer. Mobile learning can perhaps be defined as any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are handheld or devices including mobile phones, smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and their peripherals, tablet PCs, and laptop PCs, but not desktops in carts and other similar solutions (Traxler, 2005; Bukharaev&Altaher, 2017). It provides students with the opportunity to learn anywhere and at any time (Crescente& Lee, 2011). It facilitates equal opportunities for all by allowing learning to be accessible across time zones, thus making location and distance irrelevant to the learners (Tsinakos& Ally, 2013). Hashemi, et. al. (2011) states

mobile learning involves connectivity for downloading, uploading, and/or online working via wireless networks, mobile phone networks, or both and linking to institutional systems e.g. Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and Management Information Systems (MIS). Mobile learning brings an alternative way of distance learning.

Mobile learning through portable devices is a supplementary tool for traditional learning rather than a replacement of it (Beutner and Rüscher, 2017). It does not replace traditional learning, but is just another way of learning using new technology (Hashemi, et. al., 2011). In mobile learning, the students are mobile and are at the center of the learning, and the technology allows the learner to learn in any context (Ally &Blázquez, 2015). Thus, mobile learning is not about technology, it is about the learners.

Despite the abundance of mobile devices, mobile learning carries out plenty of benefits and challenges to be considered. It encompasses three characteristics namely portability; connectivity; context-sensitivity (Cheon et al., 2012). Besides, Traxler (2005) mentions the other core characteristics that define mobile learning such as spontaneous, private, situated, informal, bite-sized, light-weight, personalized, and interactive. Mobile Learning applications have various educational benefits that can be used as study aids; they can be accessed from almost anywhere; and with the aid of location capabilities, students can use location-based information (Cheon et al., 2012). In line with these, Beutner and Rüscher(2017) propose some advantages and disadvantages or challenges of mobile learning. Those belong to the advantages are flexibility, transportability, independent of location and time, better usage of idle time, learning on the move, customer staff and member friendly, overall cost-saving, easier organization of date. On the contrary, the previous benefits do not come without challenges. Despite the current availability of mobile devices does not mean that the acceptance of these technologies for the learning process has been already established. To achieve credibility, it needs to get a conceptual basis, indeed. Furthermore, Beutner and Rüscher (2017) state the challenges of mobile learning include the size of mobile, devices too small for some learning content, less interaction and personal connection, requires new learning concepts, organizational investment too high, the possibility to adjourn work and free

timing as a possible motivation blocker, too much freedom with learning materials, and missing hard and software. Hashemi(2011) and Sarrab, Elgamas, &Aldabbas, (2012), similarly, mention that the weaknesses of mobile learning are small screens of mobile phones and PDAs, limited storage capacities in PDAs, battery life/charge, lack of common operating system, lack of common hardware platform make it difficult to develop content for all.

### **3. *Kulwap* (online course through WhatsApp Group Interactions)**

*Kulwap* stands for 'kuliah melalui whatsapp', a term used by Indonesian to indicate an instructional course carried out through WhatsApp Group Interactions. It means that the course is carried out by utilizing WhatsApp instant messaging. This application is being widely used among undergraduate students to send multimedia messages like photos, videos, audios along with simple text messages (Lenhart, 2007; Ashiyani&Salehi, 2016). It is a cross-platform smartphone messenger that employs users' existing internet data plan to help them network socially in real time (WhatsApp, 2010). It was created by Brian Anton and Jan Koom, both Yahoo employees (Barhoumi, 2015). WhatsApp instant messaging handled ten billion messages per day in August 2012 (Olanof, 2012). During June 2013, WhatsApp Inc. announced that they handled 27 billion messages every 24 hours (Sushma, 2012). *Kulwap*, therefore, is currently being popular to be one of online, especially, mobile learning tools during the pandemic period of Covid-19.

WhatsApp has positioned itself as a superior alternative to SMS messaging, which can be very expensive when used in foreign countries due to roaming charges; It, in contrast, relies on the active Wi-Fi network (Barhoumi, 2015). It works via phone numbers and integrates with users' address books, thus there is no need to memorize usernames or passwords (Aburezeq&Ishtaiwa, 2013). In the same point of view, Bere (2012) states that WhatsApp has the collaborative features such as multimedia, group chat, unlimited messaging, cross-platform engagements, offline messaging, no charged involved, and pins and usernames. Additionally, Hamad (2017) declares that it is the most common chatting application to use among the students, students don't need to have a computer, it is attainable, and it does not cost much. It is also claimed that Whatsapp can be a

solution to the problem of teaching meaningful and contextualized interaction in teaching communicative competence. The voice message of WhatsApp is capable of supporting mobile learning because it gives instant feedback for both the teacher and the students, while its text message is an instant message where the internet connection is good (Kola & Sunday, 2018). Amry (2014) also demonstrates the effectiveness of WhatsApp social networking in comparison with face-to-face learning in the classroom. Further, it is said that the general benefits of using WhatsApp instant messaging in the blended mobile lecture are as follows: it facilitates online collaboration and cooperation between online students connected from school or home in a blended mobile lecture; it is a free application that is easy to use; it can share learning objects easily through comments, texting and messaging. WhatsApp is also cheap to activate it is free to download and use it in any smartphone.

### **C. Research Method**

This study is an exploratory research project employing a qualitative method. It was conducted at NahdatulUlama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung) which is located at Jl. Suwandi\_Suwardi, Km. 01, Temanggung, Central Java. Fifty-six students altogether from six classes who took the English course became the subjects whose perceptions on the benefits and the challenges of *Kulwap* (online course through WhatsApp Group interactions) were analyzed. It was carried out in the even semester of the academic year 2019/2020, from March to April 2020. It was preceded by preliminary research by interviewing the students intended to identify the type of application they wanted to conduct online learning of English subjects during the pandemic period of COVID-19. Here, it was found that *Kulwap* was chosen by all students taking an English course (100%).

The procedures of the instructional process were similar to the process of the onsite course. First, to show the students' presence on the day, they needed to fill the check (✓) in their names written in the description box. Besides the presenter on the day, there was a student voluntarily became a moderator to guide the process of an online course. After all, were ready, the moderator please the presenter to deliver the topic in which Islamic knowledge became the basic



themes discussed in the English course this semester. The presenter sent a slide of PowerPoint containing the topic being discussed, then explained it using video or voice notes. It was not allowed to read the slide but explained using the presenter's own words in English, instead. After the presenter finished explaining, the moderator gave all audiences to make responses which could be in forms of questions, opinions, feedback, or critiques. They had to be done in voice notes or short videos. Each audience's name giving response was recorded or noted. The discussion continued until there were no more responses from the audiences. After the moderator closed the session, the lecturer gave feedback about the topic delivered by the presenter, the process of the course, the way of the students speaking in English, and gave appreciation to the presenter and the moderator. Then the course was ended by saying goodbye. Each online instructional process was carried out by following the rules agreed previously by all participants, lecturer, and some specific ones made by the moderator.

The process of online courses through *Kulwap* was done in two months. There were some aspects need to be evaluated afterward. To collect data to find the results of the evaluation, a semi-restrictive open-ended interview was carried out. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Besides, students' written testimonies were also collected to support the results of the interview. The students were requested to write their points of view relating to the instructional process through *Kulwap*. Both interviews and the written testimonies highlight the benefits and the challenges the students encountered during the process of English course done through *Kulwap*. The data resulted from the interview and the written testimonies were then analyzed through qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994, pp.10-11): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

#### **D. Findings**

After all online meetings were accomplished, an interview was conducted by inviting some participants to be the representatives of the students to know whether the process of online learning revealing some points to be evaluated or not. Additionally, students' written testimonies were collected to identify their

points of view regarding the benefits and the challenges of *Kulwap* to conduct an online English course.

The data resulted from the interview showed some real conditions that the majority of the students enjoy joining the online course through *Kulwap*. Most of them stated that joining the course through *Kulwap* is enjoyable since it was done such kind in a relaxing situation. It made the students feel comfortable. They can be seen through the statements below:

1. *"I can join the course while laying my body on the bed."* (St-01)
2. *"Having a course in a relax position, like I am not having class."* (St-03)
3. *"I act as if I am not having class. Look like I am so lazy, but I am joining the class."* (St-07)
4. *"We are relaxed, but we are doing a meaningful activity which is joining the English online course."* (St-02)
5. *"I don't need to take a shower first before joining the class. Peace."* (St-05)

Besides relaxing, the students also said that learning through *Kulwap* was flexible. The materials can be accessed anytime and anywhere. When they were late coming to the course, they can still access the materials without being left by the class. They are as shown in the following sentences:

1. *"We can access materials anytime."* (St-08)
2. *"I can access lecture materials at my comfort."* (St-06)
3. *"I can access the course materials anytime and anywhere."* (St-03)
4. *"I can learn anywhere and anytime."* (St-04)
5. *"It is easy to be accessed and flexible (anytime, anywhere)."* (St-05)
6. *"I can repeat the part I could not understand yet."* (St-01)

Other plus points that can be experienced by the students are that the students already use WhatsApp and it is very simple to use. They are expressed through the sentences follows:

1. *"We don't need to open a laptop, we just need to open cell-phone, very simple."* (St-08)
2. *"Everybody has already used WhatsApp, so we don't need to learn more about using a new application."* (St-05)

3. *"Do not need to install new apps so that my gadget is not full of a new application."*  
(St-01)
4. *"Everybody just needs to use it, we don't need to learn how to use it"* (St-02)
5. *"What I love is we can focus on the course, not on the new things we have to learn."*  
(St-04)

The next thing that can be considered as the advantages of using *Kulwap* is that by joining virtual class through *Kulwap*, it can increase the students' confidence. The reason is that they felt that they don't need to feel shy when they have to speak in English in front of the lecturer. They are proved by the statements below:

1. *"I feel more confident because I don't need to see my lecturer when I have to speak in English."* (St-07)
2. *"I can prepare before responding directly to my friends and it made me more ready."*  
(St-06)
3. *"The class is more interactive, many students participate better than in the onsite course."* (St-04)
4. *"The students do not have a burden to speak in English, much better than in the direct class."* (St-03)
5. *"It provides more time to practice, apply, and ask questions in class."* (St-01)
6. *"I can do more practice in listening, speaking."* (St-02)
7. *"When I feel shy to participate in the course, I don't need to give a response in the video, I can just use voice note and sent it to the group."* (St-05)

On the contrary, the benefits above do not come along by themselves. The challenges of using *Kulwap* are also considered by the students as the things to be examined for further use in the following time. Some barriers the students faced during the process of online course through *Kulwap* can be identified here. Constant internet access or connectivity became one of the problems the students had to solve. It is not a simple thing for all students. They are as stated here:

1. *"Usage of internet data (cost); not all students can afford it."* (St-03)
2. *"Problem of internet access among students."* (St-07)

3. *"We live in a remote area, the internet becomes a big problem for us." (St-08)*
4. *"The students who are limited in internet access often left the course or absent joining the course." (St-04)*
5. *"Even though the using of Kuwap is cheap enough or low bandwidth, but when we are off from internet connection, it means we of course cannot join the class." (St-07)*

Additionally, joining an online course by looking at the screen of the gadget which is not too big made the students got a problem with their sight. They complain that they sometimes got sick on their eyes. They are stated as follows:

1. *"Sometimes my eyes bothered because I have to see the gadget monitor too long." (St-02)*
2. *"When I missed the class in a few minutes for example, sometimes I left the process which needs me to scroll-up, it made me dizzy." (St-06)*
3. *"If the chats have been long, they made me get a headache." (St-01)*

Other than that, the students, who are not serious to join the class, usually do not have high motivation. They tend to join the class without giving active participation and that can lead other students to become passive too. They were seen by the following statements:

1. *"Some students seem to do not prepare their presence in the class, and it made the other sometimes become lazy and just come along with the process." (St-07)*
2. *"We are easily distracted by other things on the mobile while having a course." (St-02)*
3. *"Some students shared materials or gave a response without learning them previously. They just try to be in the class without really being in the class." (St-06)*
4. *"We sometimes just try to join the class without really join the course." (St-05)*

Last but not least, the lecturer's response to the online course sometimes regarded not satisfying since the time is limited and the lecturer just use the rest of the little time so that the feedback is not complete to fulfill the need of the students.

1. *"Lecturer sometimes gave limited response because the time is limited." (St-01)*
2. *"The lecturer's response is not as satisfying as when we have real onsite class." (St-07)*

In line with the results of the interview, the students' written testimonies express some conditions indicating that *Kulwap* as the tool of online course brings some benefits as well as its challenges. The following figure represents that most students stated that having an English course through *Kulwap* is enjoyable. They got convenience because they felt so relax and comfortable when they were doing an online course through *Kulwap*. They do not need to be formal; even they do not need to prepare their appearance physically, such as taking a shower or wearing neat clothes firstly to join the course. On the other side, it is stated that to be always online, and need stable internet connection sometimes bother the students.

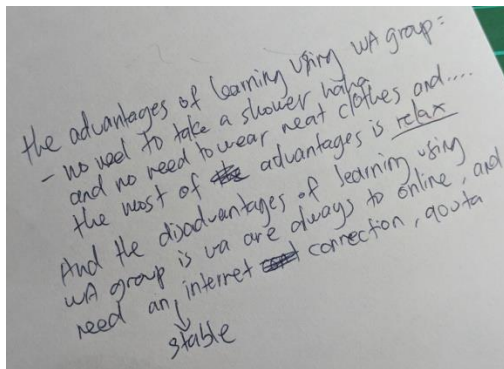


Figure 1. The Student's written testimony on *Kulwap* (St-09)

Some other students mention that *Kulwap*, for sure, can support the Government program to do physical distancing during this pandemic period. The students do not need to do face-to-face classroom activities to fulfill their need for learning. The flexibility of the venue enables the students to be able to learn everywhere. On the contrary, the internet connection, frequent miscommunication, and lack of focus for the students belong to the consideration of using *Kulwap*. It is as represented through the following figure:

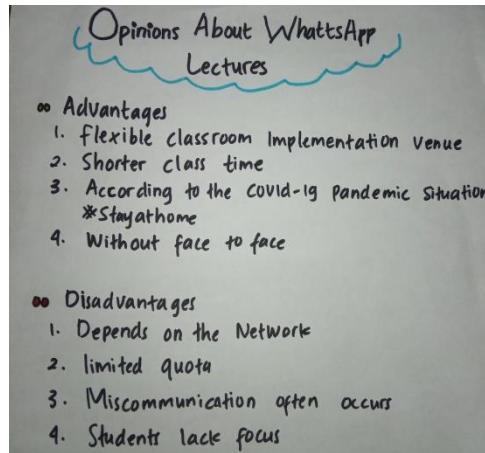


Figure 2. The Student's written testimony on *Kulwap* (St-10)

## E. Discussion

The data presented as the findings of the study show that implementing *Kulwap* proves to be beneficial to the students as reflected in the feedback given. However, some other points also go along with them as the weaknesses to be made as to the considerations. The advantages cover some points namely convenience and enjoyment in which the students can feel comfortable when they were joining the online course. The simplicity of *Kulwap* became the thing led the students unneeded to use any other complicated application to support their need for learning. They just utilized the available app on their gadget. In the aspects of accessibility and flexibility, the students are enabled to access the course materials at anytime and anywhere which makes them able to recall the topic of the course whenever and wherever they want. Besides, using *Kulwap* does not give the students a burden since they don't need to open any other application on their laptop. Another plus point, additionally, states that through *Kulwap*, the students are trained to be more confident in expressing themselves in English without worrying to be shy to the lecturer. The students also said that they can develop their listening skills, speaking skills, as well as their vocabulary that in these points, almost similar to what is conducted by Hamad (2017) mentioning that the improvements cover four all language skills. Overall, the results of the study confirm the ones carried out by Gon&Rawekar, (2017); Kola & Sunday (2018); Hamad (2017); Army (2014) which mostly show that online

course through *Kulwap* brings some advantages including the accessibility and flexibility, while the challenges mostly relate to the internet access or connectivity, eye strain, lack motivation, limited response from the lecturer during the online instructional process.

## **F. Conclusion**

From the findings of this study, it can be summarized that the majority of the students rated the use of *Kulwap* is important and effective in helping them to join the online course. It demonstrates the effectiveness of WhatsApp social networking in comparison with face-to-face learning in the classroom. *Kulwap* helps students to create a learning community, to easily construct knowledge, and to share it with other members of a WhatsApp group through instant messaging.

The results of this study also find that the students are familiar with mobile technology especially *Kulwap*. They figure out that the use of *Kulwap* is beneficial and considered to be effective to support online courses through mobile devices. There are several benefits of *Kulwap* revealed through this study. They include easy accessibility, time and place flexibility, and convenience. On the other hand, problems of internet access mostly become the barriers for the students having online courses through *Kulwap*. The use of WhatsApp makes the students more open to the teacher. The students also can learn outside the classroom whenever and wherever they want.

Along with the advantages, there were many challenges faced by the students as well as at the same time. Since having smartphone and internet connectivity are the pre-requisites of online courses through *Kulwap*, it must be ensured that all students must be supported by them well. Besides, there is also a technical thing to be considered well regarding the eye constrain, students lack motivation, and boringness to join online course. Additionally, the students are easily distracted by their mobile devices' stimulating and interactive capabilities that connect them with non-course related activities. In other words, students are easily pulled away from focusing on class content. At last, mobile learning can be used to solve the traditional learning system problems. Mobile learning through

*Kulwap* is not to replace traditional classrooms but they can be used to complement the learning process in our schools and universities.

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