

EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR INFORMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A STUDY OF ESL LEARNERS IN SIALKOT, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the informal learning of the English language through social media platforms by the ESL learners in Sialkot, Pakistan. The massive use of digital technology and social media has seen as a critical construct in language learning, and second language learners to be specific. This study seeks to explore social media platforms the ESL learners use and learners preferences to use them. The socio-cultural theory and notion of informal learning that focuses on social interaction in language development is used as theoretical framework. Qualitative research method was used, based on interviews and content analysis of data of 10 respondents aged 20-25 and actively use social media to learn English. The participants were selected by using purposive sampling. Thematical analysis was used to analyze the data by determining the main themes which were the preferences to platforms, social media learning activities and motivation of participating in social media. It was found that most platforms were a common platform, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, and the choice made by learners would depend on their functionality, as well as how they suit the learning style. It was identified that the language abilities, such as speaking, listening, and writing were improved by using social media, by allowing communication with peers and the repossession of the educative materials. The findings of this research suggest that social media is flexible, interactive, and effective medium to learn languages, particularly among young learners. The results of the study provide an argument in support of the introduction of social media in traditional learning environments and the provision of the digital skills to instructors. In conclusion, social media functions an valuable tool of informal language learning as it enhances both motivation and proficiency of ESL language learners in Pakistan.

Keywords: Social media, ESL learners, informal language learning, Sialkot, thematic analysis, educational implications.

1. Introduction

The modern era places importance on the acquisition of the various elements of a language, most of which occur through social interaction. Despite the recent shifts in communicative practices, the process of language learning continues to provide social value. The role of social media in accelerating language acquisition, in the context of second language learners, particularly in Pakistan, provides an important opportunity for the effective practice of ESL pedagogy. Since the advent of formal schooling in Pakistan, English has remained a compulsory subject. The study of the impact of social media on informal acquisition of English as a second language in Pakistan underscores the importance of social media as a tool for modern language learning. The study seeks to measure the extent to which social media enhances the informal learning of English in Pakistan and the relationship between technology and the learning process in the country.

Considering the role of social media in relation to language exposure, the integration of embedded language practice and learner motivation in the language acquisition process presents another key perspective in understanding the transformative shifts in language education in Pakistan, which this study sets out to examine. With the advancement of technologies worldwide, social networks are omnipresent, and this includes Pakistan. Communication, commerce, and education are among the activities that have grown rapidly in

the last ten years through the use the country's social media platforms. This section aims to describe and interpret the data, trends, and patterns concerning social media utilization in Pakistan, while also accounting for the socio-economic dimensions that have fostered social media proliferation in the country. The increase of social media utilization in Pakistan, mainly for networking, has been made possible through the use of the Internet and smartphones.

2. Literature Review

The analysis of the use of social media has demonstrated that it has become an influential in education, and in particular in language learning due to its impact on traditional educational practices as well as an opportunity for learners and educators. It has attracted a lot of consideration from scholars when applied to educational contexts as a tool that has more advantages than disadvantages the benefits of teaching with the help of social media are that students can work in teams. Social media in education is conducive to building meaningful relationships between students or teachers. In similar opinion with Manca and Ranieri, (2016) stated that, use Facebook and twitter as mode of teaching and learning that enhances interactivities between students enabling sharing of ideas, learning materials and feedbacks in a given duration of time. This aspect of social media makes the use of social media to promote learning and interaction among learners possible since it creates a sense of community for learners especially for language learning where learning is centered on learning through interaction.

This aspect enables learners to interact with native speaking individuals hence experiencing social actuality hence enhancing their linguistic and cultural knowledge (Mills, 2011). According to the study by Kabilan, Ahmad and Abidin (2010), it was found that the integrated use of social media in language learning boosts the learners' self- confidence and increases their motivation through social media as they offer the learners' forum to practice the target language in realistic situations. Also, they enhance interaction, enable users to have access to real information, as well as differentiate students' learning processes. Education is an important tool that helps in ensuring that all players in the society are transformed to fit a new kind of social entity hence educators are advised to embrace new technologies that are readily available and help in addressing the different needs of students Greenhow and Lewin (2016).

As valuable as the use of social media in education and language learning is, the matter also has drawbacks. A few drawbacks associated with the use of technology in learning include privacy invasion, which is evident in cases such as cyberbullying, distraction, and potential negative influence (Asterhan & Bouton, 2017). All these on a must be on a careful note with the teachers being able to set and enforce some rules that have to do with respect in the online learning environment. Moreover, the factor that can be a significant hurdle to effective implementation of social media in learning is digital divide. Availability of the necessary technology and dependable internet connection is not a blanket issue for all learners: technology divides exist between different regions and also between different socio-economic groups; thus for some learners, the social media is a great boon to its social purposes (Kennedy & Fox, 2013). Redressing these disparities is important so as to ensure that all students interested in the educational prospects of social media can achieve the benefits.

Teacher knowledge and content knowledge are also considered the important prerequisite if one has to implement the use of social media in education. Perhaps there is what educators, or many of them, do not possess enough digital competence or assurance to integrate social networks into the learning process (Johnson, 2011). It is crucial to equip teachers with the tools and guidance required for enhancing their usage of social media with the aim of enriching instruction.

i. ESL Learning in the Digital Age

Various forms of research resources such as videos, podcasts, e-books, and exercises in the form of animations to suit one's style of learning and proficiency level can make the teaching and learning easier (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Services such as Duolingo and Rosetta stone provide model courses that can be assumed in learning language as this permits learner the elasticity to practice English anytime (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). By digital tools education is also made wealthier so that lessons can be more artistic and interactive. Implementing PDA in the form of VR and AR creates envired scenarios that allow learners to practice contextual-combing language skills in suitable and circumstantial practice environments that naturally characterize the real skills performance arenas (Huang, Rauch, & Liaw, 2010). These technologies provide the learner a zone in which they can practice free from an immediate observation which is important in the language learning. In the existing society, social media has become an important instrument for interaction hereafter enhancing communication and teamwork in learning among the learners studying in the ESL setting. That way, Social networking sites such as Face book, Twitter and Instagram which allow learners to connect with native speakers; as well as other people in natural way; thus, enhancing the linguistic and cultural competence of the learners (Mills, 2011). Additional advantage of social media is that it also nurtures co-learning whereby learners can share possessions and feedback while encouraging each other through the social media (Sharma & Barrett, 2007).

In addition, mobile learning, has gradually found its place among ESL educational practices. In accumulation, through the use of modern gadgets like smartphones and tablets, learners can use different app and Games available on their Playstore/ Appstore for acquiring language, dictionaries, and other related applications on the move. The opportunities in m-learning are useful for supporting the listening and speaking because voice recognition systems are voluntarily existing in a majority of handheld devices and help to manage the interactive dialogue that will make language practice more fetching by being convenient (Chen, 2013). While highly effective the amalgamation of digital technologies into ESL instruction also present some challenges. The first is the development of the 'digital divide' which involves the qualitative, longitudinal and social differences in access to Information Communications Technology (ICTs) (Selwyn, 2011).

Furthermore, I would like to highlight that the material available online is rather varied, and not all lessons are well designed. Chappelle (2010) wrote that there is a necessity for educators to assess the type of the digital technologies and media used in their instruction to meet learning outcomes and facilitate the learning of the second language. To implement the best practices in the use of perf ICT in ESL classrooms, there is a requirement for professional growth to assist the teachers. The technological progression age commonly known as the computer era has elevated questions on data confidentiality and security. Nowadays, many web interfaces and apps involve the need to provide personal data that can turn out to be risky. As suggested in the research by Livingstone (2012), it is important for learners to be informed of such threats and to hold some level of security measures for their information. The research done from 2020 to 2025 highlights that how learner's autonomy, motivation and language proficiency level is nurtured by use of social media, while revealing concerns about disruption, fabrication, and unequal digital access (Lee, 2021; Rahman & Hameed, 2022; Zhu, 2024).

ii. ESL Learning Through Social Media: Existing Research

Social media's utility in ESL learning has become one of the recent trends in literature. Research has shown that the development of language skills through social networking sites offers unique opportunities in language refinement, communicative practice, and the formation of language learning communities. Nevertheless, the absence of digital literacy, problems of data, and quality of content are still some of the persistent issues that require addressed. This

chapter outlines in detail the literature review on the use of social media for teaching ESL. Each study incorporates the results and the derived conclusion.

iii. Social Media and Informal Language Learning

Informal language learning refers to any learning that goes on outside of structured academic environments, typically driven by individual interests or social interactions. As noted by Lee (2021), informal English learning through social media provokes an increase in motivation and self-directed learning, where learners shape learning within self-directed frameworks and monitor their own progress. Likewise, in their study, Shahbaz and Khan (2021) posited that Pakistani ESL learners highly relied on social media to reach global content and communities where they extend their linguistic capabilities and exposure. The extent of this informal learning is quite beneficial to formal instruction as it ensures learners remain engaged well beyond the specified classroom hours. The researchers point out that digitally connected ESL learners have engaged in community participation and interaction to a degree that informal learning through community participation remains a prime conduit for instruction (Alkamel, 2024; Murad, 2023). Facebook and WhatsApp, among other social tools, permit learners to engage in unsupervised interaction, enabling the free use of English in conversational scenarios - an exercise largely absent from lesson contexts (Ghani & Ahmad, 2021; Khurram et al., 2023).

iv. Platform-Specific Impacts on ESL Learning

Different social media platforms have distinct pedagogical and linguistic utility functions. Because of its availability and the interactional nature, Facebook remains the most utilized platform. Learners engage in threads and forums, in addition to the group discussions, all of which facilitate the expansion of social consciousness and vocabulary. Javid and Althaqafi (2020) and Khurram et al. (2023) corroborate that discussions on WhatsApp positively influenced learners' confidence in written English and helped improve their syntactic accuracy. YouTube has become powerful in developing learners' listening and speaking. With video tutorials, vlogs, and commentary channels, learners access authentic and varied language and culture (Saeed & Asghar, 2022). The combined visual and auditory modes enable multimodal learning which is advantageous to ESL learners with varying preferences. Of Instagram and TikTok, both social media applications contain small and engaging material that facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and the understanding of meaning in context. For example, TikTok micro-learning videos present grammar and pronunciation with short and relatable examples that coincide with present attention spans (Khalil & Sulaiman, 2025).

v. Benefits of Social Media in Informal English Learning

One of the most consistent findings by researchers is that social media enhances learner motivation and the degree of autonomy learned individuals possess. Lee (2021) and Shahbaz & Khan (2021) explain that learners become independent of the conventional confines of the classroom as they gain control over the pace, time, and the modality of learning. In the context of Pakistani learners, as Saeed and Asghar (2022) state, YouTube and Instagram serve as informal English tutors even for those learners who are situated outside of an English speaking environment. The use of social media as informal learning tools also offers, from a socio-cultural lens, ESL learners unmonitored access to global communities of connected informal practice. Zhu (2024) and Murad (2023) illustrate the inclusive and vibrant learning ecosystems ESL learners want to participate in, that enable them to observe and model authentic language use, and engage in a continuum of practice. The integration of collaborative tools in social media like WhatsApp and Facebook groups is a prime example of community building, which positively fuels emotional and cognitive involvement (Annamalai et al., 2024).

3. Research Question

What social media platforms do ESL learners in Sialkot, Pakistan, use for informal language learning and why?

4. Research Methodology

The research design encompasses the qualitative method, counting the use of participant data from questionnaire and interviewing, and content analysis to study the role of social media in the informal learning of language development among the young ESL learners in Sialkot, Pakistan. The demographic factors that are comprised permit us to understand the influence of different factors on learning of second language more profoundly. This is because qualitative research, as Creswell (2013) notes, is very upright when we need to investigate context and process, and yet these are most important in the study under consideration. A case study method is central to the design that enables the investigation of learners' experiences with social media as a tool of language learning in-depth. According to Yin (2014), the case studies are effective when teaching modern phenomena in which context is critical. The participant observation is used to collect data where learner IDs give an understanding of the social media usage in real life. Interviews, which are grounded on the semi-structured formats, offer inclusive accounts of how learners feel within the virtual environments (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The study contains the section on the robustness of research tools in order to guarantee validity and reliability. The participants involve 20-25 years young ESL learners of the age group of 10 participants belonging to Sialkot active in using social media to learn language through a purposive sampling technique. The findings of this study are obtained through thematic analysis. The design could be an exceptional contributor to the discussion of the impact of social media on language learning.

5. Data Analysis

The detailed information about the participants of this study is given below to get a clear thoughtful of the participants of this study. Some participants' information about their backgrounds, education, and past experiences in learning languages were offered to develop the discussion and justify their answers and inputs to the research. The table 4,1 shows the details of the participants of the study and the commonly used social media platforms for language learning.

Table 1

Summary of the Participants Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Education/Occupation	Social Media Usage
Ali	19	Male	College student, majoring in Business Admin.	Primarily uses Facebook and YouTube for language learning.
Aisha	17	Female	High school student	Frequently uses Instagram and YouTube for English language learning content.
Bilal	24	Male	Marketing professional	Uses LinkedIn and WhatsApp for professional development and daily practice.
Sana	21	Female	University student, majoring in English Lit.	Regularly listens to podcasts and participates in Twitter discussions.
Ahmed	20	Male	University student, majoring in Software Eng.	Engages in Facebook group discussions and watches YouTube tutorials.

Zara	18	Female	High school graduate	Uses Snapchat and TikTok to follow English-speaking influencers and educational content.
Omar	22	Male	Graphic designer	Utilizes various social media platforms to improve language skills independently.
Fatima	19	Female	Medical student	Engages with different social media platforms to practice and improve English.
Sara	23	Female	Teacher	Uses social media to integrate new methods and continuously learn.
Amjad	24	Male	BBA Student	Uses FB, Insta, and TikTok

Their practices for social media use in language learning are also shown from factual information of individuals, showing that they come from different education levels, ages, and reasons for learning languages. This variety makes a noteworthy contribution to understand the effects of social media with the ESL learners in Sialkot, Pakistan and enhances the coverage and credibility of the study.

6. Analysis of Interview Questions

i. ESL learners use Social Media Platforms to Learn

Social media, in turn, plays a significant role in facilitating the informal learning of English among its users. Ali is a college student who is 19 years old and he uses Facebook and YouTube to learn English. He would moderately use the Facebook groups because it helps him take an active part in a discussion in which he can receive a constructive feedback. Pronunciation and writing are some of the tutorial activities where Ali finds YouTube more beneficial because they make complex things to be explained easily. Aishah who is a 17 years old high school student is also dependent on Instagram and You Tube. She follows accounts on Instagram that help her learn English by giving her daily tips and challenges with words, and this way, it is both entertaining and motivating. YouTube provides additional learning materials on grammar and speaking exercise. Bilal is a 24-year-old brand experience manager, who uses LinkedIn both to read articles and join professional networks to improve his business English. He also practices with WhatsApp with friends and family on a daily basis and this also makes him better at a conversation.

ii. Impact of the Learning Resources and Tasks of Languages

Sana is a 21-year-old university student who strains that podcasts and Twitter help her to enhance her vocabulary and progress her reading skills. Podcasts introduce her to different accents and classy words, and Twitter helps her to stay connected with what is going on and provide her with new phrases in the context. Ahmed, a 20-year old student of software engineering develops his own confidence to talk and write by being actively involved in the Facebook groups and viewing YouTube tutorials. The response that he gets enables him to rectify his errors promptly and the visual and audio presentation that is available on YouTube enhances his studies. The example of Zara, a high school graduate (18-year-old), proves that English learning can occur using Snapchat and TikTok, where the latter is also a form of educational content presented by influencers. These sites offer an amusing and entertaining

approach of learning new words and sentences, as they make her studies more active and interesting.

iii. Incentives of Social Media-Based Learning

Omar, a graphic designer aged 22, finds that knowing English is the key to his future in the career. In his leisure time, he thinks he can learn language using social media because it is flexible and the resources are readily accessible through social media. Fatima is a medical student who is ruthless to go abroad and succeed in what she is doing at the age of 19 years old. She discovers that social media facilities provide a variety of resources, which aids her to move on with a standard learning timetable. A 23-year-old teacher Sara is one of those users who use social media to keep abreast of the new teaching strategies and developments in language. Flexibility in terms of access to resources at any given time enables her to incorporate new wisdom in her pedagogic process which enables her to relate to the students well.

iv. Analysis of the Responses of the Participants for Themes

This research paper aimed to investigate the role of social media in informal English language acquisition of ESL learners in Sialkot, Pakistan. The most communal platforms, particularly by those of the respondent included Facebook, which is used by Ali to discuss on the Facebook groups and YouTube that he uses to sing grammar and pronunciation lessons. Aisha is a high school student, who uses Instagram to get language tips on a daily basis and listens to YouTube to practice specific auditions and use speaking exercises. Bilal is a marketing professional who uses LinkedIn to understand business English and WhatsApp to practice English daily with the peers. Sana listens to podcasts and follows Twitter to increase her vocabulary and better understand various accents whereas Ahmed learns to speak and write after participating in Facebook groups and YouTube tutorial videos. Zara is a 18 year old high school graduate, and she learns new words and phrases by studying with Snapchat, and Tik Tok content creators. The researchers also considered the impact of language learning activities and resources in social media on the ESL learners. Users such as Sana, Ahmed, and Zara have enjoyed learning through interactive nature and engaging platforms where they get instant feedback on other managers and learn in a more interactive manner. Lastly, the paper explored the drive to use social media when learning about a language. Mastering English is very essential in the career of Omar whereas Fatima wants to study in a foreign country. The teaching example of Sara whose portrait is used in the study illustrates how personal and professional ambitions influence social media learning resources usage by the learners, as the teacher resorts to the use of social media to enhance their teaching and stay on the trend in education.

Table 2

Summary of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Supporting Evidence	Interpretation
Platform Preferences	Preferences for specific social media platforms based on their features aiding language learning.	Ali uses Facebook and YouTube; Aisha uses Instagram and YouTube; Bilal uses LinkedIn and WhatsApp.	Participants choose platforms for specific functionalities that support various aspects of language learning.
Learning Activities	Activities engaged in on social media to enhance language learning.	Sana listens to podcasts and follows Twitter discussions; Ahmed participates in Facebook discussions and watches YouTube tutorials; Zara	-Participants engage in discussions, tutorials, podcasts, and interactive content, catering to different learning

follows influencers on styles.
Snapchat and TikTok.

7. Findings and Discussion

Drawing on the research question, interviews and case studies, the thematic analysis provides a more understanding of the impact of social media on the Agglutinative inductive informal L2 learning among youngsters in Sialkot, Pakistan. In this section, we offer a more detailed analysis based on coding, themes, case studies, and interviews that underpin the findings.

i. Platform Preferences

The first coding specified the more actual forms and channels employed by the participants, which include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tik Tok, Twitter and podcasts. Platform preferences were identified as a type of themes in the presented study that resulted from the process of the focused coding, where platform selection motives were explained. Axial coding was then used to go deeper into these preferences to identify why people favored Part 2 over Part 1. Although Ali uses both the platforms for learning English, he prefers posting in a group in Facebook, while learning pronunciation and grammar in YouTube. Aisha has Instagram where she posts daily English tips and vocabulary quizzes; YouTube is for listening comprehension and grammar explanations. Bilal uses LinkedIn for professional connections and arises articles while WhatsApp is used for daily working on skills with colleagues. This is due to the specifics and nature of each platform and how the features they provide relate to the learning and teaching of a language. Facebook and LinkedIn can be used for the group discussions and professional growth, whereas YouTube is filled with valuable educational content or videos, Instagram and TikTok can turn into an engaging and entertaining way of learning. This means that learners opt for platforms that suit their learning profiles and preferences depending on what they want to achieve in their learning, and then focus on specific aspects that they consider important to improve their language proficiency.

ii. Learning Activities

The initial coding showed that participants dedicated to various learning activities, including talking to others, shared feedback, watching tutorials, and listening to podcasts, following the language challenges and doing interactive exercises. To certify that the learning activities are meaningful and relevant, they are grouped according to similar activities in order to analyze their effects on language learning. Sana also listens to podcasts and engages in the tweets to exercise her listening and comprehension as well as her vocabulary. Ahmed spends time in Facebook groups to comment and discuss while watching You-Tube tutorials to improve his speaking and writing skills. This is followed by influence from English speaking YouTubers, Snappers, and TikTokers; learning is engaging and fun for Zara. Different learning activities are present at social networks and their variety influences different types of learners. Group and partner activities facilitates practical application of the language in the classroom, educational videos and Podcasts exposures to real language and aids in apprehension and memory. The creative nature of using snapchat and TikTok makes the learner active and eager to learn more, thus proving that social media in learning is a noble venture.

Impact on Language Skills In the first spectral analysis, definite gains in speaking, writing, listening and reading were observed in terms of language proficiency enhanced through social media. The language skills theme grew from analyzing participation in the communication activities and platforms to promote and support skills. Integrating group

Twitter discussions with podcasts helped Sana strengthen her comprehension and expand her vocabulary. Joining Facebook groups and practicing conversation or even just watching YouTube tutorials helped Ahmed build confidence in voice and written discourse. From the video 'snaps' captured on different SnapChat and TikTok, Zara encountered new words and phrases. Social media positively enhance different language aspects due to, among others, exposure to diverse linguistic and real-life challenges, thus improving language proficiency. Hence, the confidence gained in discourse, listening to discussions and the podcasts is an ample aid for comprehension. It was additionally suggested in the findings that on social media, the language used is practical and functional, expanding the learning that occurs in the classroom.

8. Conclusion

Using the thematic analysis approach, this study identified several considerations that informed the selection of specific social media channels. The language learning components of social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn include open forums and discussions. The platforms provide real-time feedback that is vital for practical language application and interaction with other learners. Learners also access valuable and freely available user-generated content on Instagram and YouTube. Within these social media platforms, learners receive tutorials and informative tips, with challenges designed to promote structural second language practice yielding improved fluency. Professional development opportunities available on LinkedIn target learners who seek to master the Business English relevant for contemporary, professional communication as a way to advance their careers. The use of social platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok with educational content and challenges, games, or memes promotes a fun way to practice a language constructively. Finally, learners practice the language embedded in WhatsApp and podcast materials, which promotes practice while on the move, and within their busy schedules.

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