

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN LAHORE

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Abstract

This paper examines how social media discourse affects the learning of the English language on the tertiary level in Lahore and how informal online communication influences the academic English of students in Lahore. The qualitative design was employed to gather data on the basis of semi-structured interviews with English language learners and teachers. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was used to conduct thematic analysis on the transcribed data. The results indicate that though social media provides appropriate exposure to vocabulary, pronunciation, and language use in real life, the casualness of linguistic norms has a very strong impact on the students' academic writing and their communicative accuracy. The participants claimed to use short forms, abbreviations, slang and mixed-language texting on a regular basis, and these transferred to essays and presentations. Other themes were distraction and a lack of studying discipline, the inability to stick to the formal register, and the misunderstanding of words acquired in unconfirmed online situations. Teachers also reported on the same lines, as they observed poor writing standards in academic writing and increased dependence on social-media-driven language patterns. Pedagogical mechanisms to counteract these effects were also determined in the study with the focus being on register awareness, purposeful digital task integration, and curriculum modernization. On the whole, the study has determined that the power of social media is twofold, both positive when moderated and negative when uncontrolled and recommends that informed teaching and learning methods are needed to help students balance between informal online communication and formal academic language.

Key words: Social media, Discourse, Language learning, Register

1. Introduction

The radical revolution in communication and learning has been introduced in the twenty-first century by the growth of digital technologies exploding. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Tik Tok, and Twitter (as X) are social media platforms that have shifted how individuals socialize, share knowledge, and how they language interact with each other. Social media helps connect people globally, providing access to diverse learning opportunities and perspectives. (Agha and Hashmi, 2024). No more entertainment and social networks, these platforms have become informal learning spaces in which the use of languages continues to be negotiated and redefined (Shah, 2025). Social media is integrated in the lives of the youths in higher learning institutions influencing language practices, educational competencies and socialization in various learning environments.

This rising influence has far reaching consequences to the English language learning at the tertiary level especially in non-native settings like Pakistan. English is a very important language in academic achievement and in career development as it is a global lingua franca and language of instruction in most universities (Li and Wang, 2020). However, the classroom focuses on formal and academic English, the conversation on social media is usually informal, short, and multimodal, full of emojis, memes, and GIFs. This dualism has created a complex scenario whereby the students are forced to balance between the toleration of informal digital communication and the demands of the academic English language.

Scholars state the opportunities and challenges of this co-existence. On the positive side, social media enhances the presence of the authentic input, promotes the interaction between peers, and provides the environment of informal practicing, which would support the

vocabulary development, fluency, and confidence (Al Eidan, 2024; Li and Wang, 2020). It is also conducive to group learning, where students share their resources, give feedback and discuss them among themselves in real-time (Akram et al., 2021). This is due to sociocultural consideration of learning a language as a socially negotiated process, and social media offers an ideal environment to communicate and negotiate meaning (Vygotsky, as cited in Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2016). Conversely, the negative impact of the digital discourse is still feared. Non-academic language use such as abbreviations (u instead of you) or incomplete sentences is often infiltrating academic writing, undermining its readability and quality of the assignment (Anwar and Ghumman, 2025). This has threatened the academic integrity and sabotaged the formal English skills at the university level. In addition, social media does not include focus and concentration due to its distractive quality, worsening reading and thinking capacity and understanding (Lashari et al., 2023). Hence, social media needs to be placed under a tight rein as much as it is available to prevent any negative effects on the academic outcomes.

The international environment supports such a two-fold influence. The studies conducted in China, the Middle East, and Europe prove the assumption that social media serves as the contributor and the crippler of the language development at the same time. The authors have mentioned that exposure of Chinese EFL students helped them via digital platforms, and they also depended on informal discourse (Li and Wang, 2020). In the same way, Al Eidan (2024) discovered that Saudi students were becoming better at communication through social media but were unable to distinguish between casual and academic language. These results are used to depict that the pedagogical problem of online discourse is not a regional matter but a global issue.

The problem is especially serious in Pakistan where English is used as an instrumental and integrative tool. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA, 2024) reports that the population of broadband subscribers in the country is more than 129 million and approximately 71 million subscribers of social media with young adults being the largest population group. As English is used as a medium of instruction in higher institutions of learning, academic success, employability, and international engagement require proficiency in the language (Shahid, Rafiq, and Farid, 2025). A study in Lahore represents the prevalence of social media in the academic life of students. Ali (2023) established that social media is used by undergraduates to communicate and carry out other academic activities like assignments and presentations. The results were however varied: students showed vocabulary and confidence improvement, but some had grammatical inconsistencies and weak writing results.

The social media is also affecting the styles of communication through asynchronous interaction. Students are able to create their answers in their own time, participate in a multi-threaded discussion, and not experience the pressure of a face-to-face interaction (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2016).

The other dimension is that of learner autonomy. Online platforms enable the students to access authentic material, train skills on their own, and customize learning paths (Rawan, 2024). This autonomy promotes self-directed learning, although its value is based on the capability of students to manage time and reduce distraction (Lashari et al., 2023). Students have the possibility to substitute in-depth studying with the shallow browsing without any control and reduce the learning power of digital tools.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To find out the role of social media in English language learning.
2. To find out the factors that cause effects on English language learning at university level.

3. To find out the strategies to cope up with this.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does social media discourse affect English language learning?
2. How do specific factors of social media discourse influence English language learning at the university level?
3. What strategies can be implemented to effectively manage the impact of social media discourse on English language learning at tertiary level in Lahore?

2. Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, the significant studies were brought under reading which provide both the opportunities for informal practice and exposure, alongside challenges related to the of formal academic language.

It is important to examine the particular impacts of social media conversations on English language learning of tertiary institutions in Lahore. Lahore, being one of the key higher education centers, is inhabited by students of different backgrounds, which is why it is a perfect place to investigate the influence of digital communication on the development of linguistic competence. This questioning corresponds to the debates regarding digital literacy in the global community, where being linguistically proficient is not considered the ultimate goal but rather a responsibility since the use of digital tools in a scholarly environment must be critical and mindful (Akram et al., 2021).

Various studies highlight the positive potential of social media in supplementing traditional ELL methods. Students' frequent interaction with English content online provides a constant source of authentic language input, a key factor in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Malik & Qureshi, 2025).

This exposure is seen as a powerful motivator, as students are naturally drawn to content related to their interests (Iqbal et al., 2025). Studies conducted within the Pakistani university context further validate these benefits.

Research on university students' perceptions, including those in regions like Lahore, suggests that platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube encourage an interactive learning environment (Iqbal et al., 2025).

This is particularly true for vocabulary and the productive skill of speaking. For instance, listening and reading skills often show improvement as students engage with diverse English-language multimedia content (Fatima and Abdulsalam, 2025). The informal discourse on social media provides a low-anxiety space for practicing communication, which can help in building confidence among learners (Saeed, 2021). The use of social media for group discussions and material sharing is also noted as an effective method for enhancing both writing and speaking skills among undergraduates (Anwar & Ghumman, 2025).

The impact of social media discourse is most noticeable in the alteration of students' lexicon and grammatical practices. Scholars in Pakistan observe a trend where social media undeniably enriches vocabulary and the students' expressive range (Azhar et al., 2025). This is due to the dynamic nature of online discourse, which introduces neologisms, slang, and cultural references that might not be taught in a formal classroom (Azhar et al., 2025). The repetition of words in various digital contexts is found to enhance vocabulary retention more effectively than traditional memorization (Webb & Nation, as cited in Alharbi, 2025).

However, this lexical enrichment is often accompanied by the erosion of formal grammatical structures (Azhar et al., 2025; Saeed, 2021). The casual, rapid-fire nature of social media communication encourages the use of abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, and shortened forms, leading to a shift toward an "unrefined" or "haphazard" use of English (Chaudhuri & Sarkar, 2025).

The lack of emphasis on grammatical coherence in posts, coupled with features like predictive text, results in minimal concern for correct academic English (Chaudhuri & Sarkar, 2025). This "linguistic hybridity" poses a challenge when students transition back to formal academic writing, where grammatical accuracy is paramount (Saeed, 2021).

Academics emphasize that while social media can accelerate learning, it must be used with caution and integrated strategically within formal educational frameworks to optimize benefits and mitigate the risks of ungrammatical habits (Malik & Qureshi, 2025).

Studies advocate for pedagogical strategies that exploit the educational potential of these platforms—such as teachers innovatively using social media for disseminating educational content—while actively teaching digital and media literacy to help students differentiate between formal and informal language registers (Hussain et al., 2025).

Conclusively, social media discourse is a two-sided sword when learning English. Although it presents exposure, partnership and autonomy of learners, it also jeopardizes the quality of academic writing and distracts the learners to concentrate in their studies. In the case of tertiary level students in Pakistan and particularly the Lahore city where English skills have been a prerequisite to success, this phenomenon needs to be explored in good time. Findings of this study can inform language teaching practices, policy formulation, and digital literacy projects to make the social media a positive and not a negative influence in higher education.

3. Research Methodology

This study is conducted by using an interpretive qualitative research design to explore the complex influence of social media on the English language learning (ELL) of tertiary level students in Lahore. This methodological choice was guided by its ability to produce a rich, in-depth and contextual understanding of the participant's subjective experiences and perceptions, which would not be easily or readily gained through quantitative methods. The research did not attempt to quantify statistical relationships but instead interpret the lived realities around the relationship between the digital discourse environments (for example, dedicated learning groups, informal chats, and meme culture) and formal academic instruction. By focusing on higher education institutions in Lahore, the design enabled a deep thematic analysis that could uncover the nuanced pedagogical opportunities and challenges of the omnipresent social media in the contemporary educational life.

3.1.Data collection

Data have been collected by means of individual semi-structured interviews with a total of twelve participants - that is, eight (n=8) university students and four (n=4) English language instructors. Recruitment was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, which was kicked off by means of communication channels within departments and internal institutions to ensure that the participants were directly related to the focus of the study. Each candidate for the study was given detailed information about the purpose of the study, assurances of anonymity, and gave consent before the interview began. The interview protocol, which was developed with a thematic framework, included six to eight open ended questions designed to elicit themes associated with platform usage, perceived effects on language, and integration of curriculum. Sessions were audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed immediately after. Data collection was iterative and recruitment was stopped if thematic saturation was reached - a critical point where no more codes or major themes were being newly revealed from subsequent interviews.

3.2.Interview Questions

From students:

- 1) Explain in detail about the role of social media in English language learning.

- 2) As a student of tertiary level, do you think social media discourse can affect your English language (Like on different skills, writing, speaking etc)
- 3) Would you explain which factors of social media discourse are affecting your English language negatively?
- 4) Generally, as a student and social media user, what impacts social media discourse leaves on your English language?
- 5) Has there any instances where informal nature of social media influenced your formal English language?
- 6) Will you share any effective strategies which can help students to mitigate negative impacts of informal social media discourse on English language learning at university level?

From Teachers:

- 1) Would you please explain the role of Social media in English language learnings?
As a teacher, do you think Social media discourse can affect English language learning at university level?
- 3) How does the informal nature of social media discourse specifically influence Students ability to distinguish b/w appropriate language register. (formal and informal)
- 4) What are the key academic challenges you observe in your Student's English which you attribute, directly and Indirectly to their engagement with social media?
- 5) What strategies or are Interventions do you believe could be the most effective for mitigating the negative impact of social media discourse while using it for language learning?

4. Analysis

Several times, the participants explained the automatization of social-media conventions and that they tend to slip into the formal settings. Respondent 1(student) made it clear that short forms and slang are a negative influence:

"I believe that using short forms and slangs, e.g. LOL, are adversely affecting my English. These words have become part of my texting to the extent that I unknowingly apply them in my formal texts, which is why I make a mistake".

Respondent 2(student) provided an actual example of spelling the letters:

"I do not write the correct spelling of the word YOU, but I write only the letter u. Similarly, bcz as opposed to because."

This spillover was also related by Respondent 3 (student):

"I use short forms such as IMO in the place of In my opinion or the letters U in the place of word YOU... sometimes I even begin with some lower case letters or use colloquial words, such as I need to or I ought to, which should not be used in academic writing".

Those extracts reveal an obvious trend: the norms of online brevity and slang are becoming default orthographic and lexical practices among most students and result in register error in academic prose. In the transcripts, Romanized mixing of Urdu forms and casual English co-occur in texting is also mentioned, and it also makes the writing norms more complicated.

Students also often complained that platform affordances take up planned study time. Respondent 2(student) summarized the issue:

"we can begin with the intention of learning something but then we get lost in scrolling useless reels and stuff so I think that it is full of distractions".

Other students (Student 4 and others) stressed the unconscious time wastage in using social media:

"Social media assists us to learn a lot of things unconsciously... (Student 4)

Yet in other places students acknowledged that the unconscious exposure will tend to become a recreational scrolling instead of studying. Such behaviors are mapped to code

(notifications interrupting study), (algorithmic short video which urges people to watch more and more), and (doing homework and multitasking). The net effect is reduced study time and superficial processing of language input, which impairs the intentional practice of grammar, writing revision and reading at length.

Several students and educators noted that they found it hard to draw a line between informal social-media English and academic English. This was observed by teachers directly: they are inclined to use slang and colloquialism and those abbreviations that only the social media can offer and even the grammatical forms that can otherwise be called unacceptable in formal writing. Students were aware of the implication regarding paragraphing and style Respondent 7(student) explained,

"I occasionally just accidentally use short forms... and sometimes I can even end up starting a sentence with lowercase or even using colloquial words such as gonna or kinda, which should not be used in academic writing".

Student 6 stated that he/she has been using short words such as u or btw that are not appropriate in academic writing. These confessions correspond to (short, chatty sentences instead of a complicated syntax) and (decreased usage of connectors and paragraph structure). Loss of formality leads to a loss of clarity and submissions that seem more like a long chat than a focused academic argument. Teachers have noticed students are no longer more aware of the need to write formally, requiring specific register training.

Students also reported getting vocabulary contextually on social media and then getting words and their meanings or use wrong. Respondent 6 (student) said:

"I do not always look up pleasurable words, I usually attempt to process them according to the context it is used in, to determine what it means".

"This made me misinterpret their meanings. ... When I write or talk English, I use these words in a wrong manner".

Student, Respondent 8(student) and others also reported to be following native speakers via the Internet as to the pronunciation without checking: Respondent 3(student):

"I have a native English speaker and listening to him on a regular basis also affects my pronunciation and speaking style".

Although being exposed to native speakers may be helpful, there is also teacher warning in the transcripts: the input which students receive is not certain to be true enough. Such pieces of information match (learning incorrect things), imitating pronunciation without research), and (believing viral information or influencers). The consequence is that incorrect usage is brought to the speaking and writing stage that needs to be corrected in the classroom.

The interviews with university instructors point to the fact that in order to reduce the adverse linguistic quality of social media it is important to implement active pedagogical responses instead of mere limitation or reprobation. One of the lessons learned is that language registers must be made explicit. One of the teachers highlighted the fact that: *"Students are not aware of what the formal context is, what is informal and what is register, and they mostly use slang and conversational forms and those abbreviations that are simply particular to the social media".* This observation presents a picture that in the absence of directed classroom activities that contrast the formal academic English with the most informal discourse styles available online, the students are not aware of the linguistic changes necessitating academic communication. Teachers hence emphasize that the first step that should be taken to enable learners to recognize and prevent social-media spillover in assignments and exams is register awareness. The second option is the digital integration of tasks, whereby teachers deliberately adopt social-media formats in the academic tasks in order to practice the training of students to consciously switch registers. Indeed, as an illustration, one Respondent 4(Teacher) mentioned that, *"Due to students simply wishing to*

get their point across, they tend to write using chat-like succinctness; more structured digital work (i.e. turning an Instagram-style caption into a formal paragraph) can assist students to practice the process of expanding ideas and using the right tone". Respondent 3(teacher) commented: "These tasks are digitally incorporated to accept the platforms students are already using but to shift the habits towards academic literacy instead of dismissing them".

Lastly, the educators mentioned the necessity to modernize the curriculum because they acknowledge that the traditional methods cannot solve the linguistic reality which the students face in their daily life. The instructors explained that modern students were more inclined towards social media rather than reading books, and the curriculum should be adjusted accordingly to address the digital literacy, source evaluation, and genre-awareness courses. Revising syllabi to incorporate register training, controlled exposure to authentic online texts, and reflective assignments to online language use would help learners in negotiating informal language without inevitably applying it blindly to academic settings.

Combined, these strategies suggest to teachers that the solution to the problem is not the removal of social media out of the linguistic life of students but the strategic and purposeful use of digital activities and updating the framework of curriculum to better represent the modern language environment.

5. Findings & Discussions

This chapter presents the comprehensive findings derived from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight (n=08) university students and four (n=4) English language instructors. The analysis adhered to the six-phase thematic framework by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring methodological rigor and direct alignment between the research objectives and the qualitative data interpretation.

The process began with initial coding, labeling specific segments of the transcribed interview data. These codes were then clustered based on their underlying meaning (latent content) to form the overarching themes.

The analytical process is summarized below:

Themes & Codes

Overarching Themes	Codes	Insights from interviews
Role of social media discourse	Increasing informal mode of communication	Students are addicted of spontaneous communication and they do not notice informal means they use.
Distraction and Loss of Productive Study Time	Intended language-learning sessions turn into endless scrolling and entertainment.	Social media takes students lot of time, when they open it with intention of learning they start scrolling rather than performing intended task
Mislearning and Misunderstanding Vocabulary	Guessing meanings from captions/comments without verification leads to incorrect usage.	Students often try to understand their meanings based on the context ... This leads them to misunderstand their meanings ... when they write or speak in English, they use these words incorrectly, which is frustrating.
Erosion of Formal Register	Blurring of formal/informal	Students are not conscious of

and Academic Writing Standards	boundaries	what is the formal context, what is informal and what is register.
Habitual Use of Short Forms, Abbreviations and Slang.	Unconscious carry-over of shortcuts to formal writing	Like instead of writing the proper spellings of YOU I write just the alphabet u. In the same way, bcz instead of because, plz instead of please and so on.
Adoption of mis-spelt lexical items	Negative adoption of mis-spelt lexical items	Imitation of nonstandard pronunciation they adapt through informal communication which takes place on online platforms.
Pedagogies for Harnessing Digital Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for awareness of different language registers. • The Digital Integration of Tasks. • Curriculum Modernization 	Integrated technology by assigning work that requires using the (actually somewhat formal and academic) language in a digital space. Teachers called for an institutional change in the curriculum so as to formally acknowledge and teach digital literacy.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of social media discourse on the learning of English as a second language at the tertiary level in Lahore based on twelve interviews (n=12) eight of the ESL/ESL students and four interviews with instructors, conducted thematic analysis of the results using the model of Braun and Clarke (2006) which showed a complex yet a consistent pattern in all participants. The results proved that even though the social media offers easy access to vocabulary, pronunciation, on-life expressions, and communicative confidence, the informal rules of language have a strong impact on academic English of the learners unchecked. According to the students, habitual use of short form, abbreviation, bricolage, and mixed language texting, created the problem of register confusion, spelling deformation, poorly developed academic writing format, and misunderstanding of the vocabulary acquired through informal online contexts. Teachers also listed a decreasing knowledge of formal rules, shortened reading capacity, and inabilities in directing learners with informal online sources as primary input to reading academic texts as the reasons. The thematic analysis also revealed aspects like distraction, passive scrolling, lack of oral practice and inconsistency in self-regulation of learners in addition to pointing to pedagogical paths to enhance the situation, which might be explicit register awareness, the integration of digital tasks and curriculum revision to integrate critical digital literacy. On the whole, the research paper comes to the conclusion that social media is not necessarily bad or good in its nature, its impact turns to be scholarly productive only when student learners are enabled to separate between formal and

informal languages and when the teaching faculty takes the lead in using digital resources within their didactic programs.

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