

## THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Syeda Sabira**

University of Baltistan, Skardu, Department of Languages and Cultural Studies

[biintealihussaini@gmail.com](mailto:biintealihussaini@gmail.com)

**Omar J. Alkhatib (Corresponding Author)**

Professor of Civil and Structural Engineering, Architectural Engineering Department United  
Arab Emirates University

[Omar.alkhatib@uaeu.ac.ae](mailto:Omar.alkhatib@uaeu.ac.ae)

### Abstract

*Social Media has revolutionised the way University Students communicate with English in non-classroom environments. The study employs qualitative research design to investigate the effect of social media in English language learning among the University students. The study is based on one of two methods: semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 purposively selected participants who were asked about how platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp help increase vocabulary, writing speed, confidence in speaking, pronunciation, and communicative competence. Enhanced vocabulary acquisition, improved reading and writing practices, increased exposure to authentic language use, development of communicative confidence and the emergence of informal learning communities are the five main themes identified in the interview data, and have been identified by thematic analysis. Participants noted that they were self-confident that their English proficiency had improved, but that non-standard varieties of English were a problem, that they were distracted, and that they did not always engage in learning activities. The results indicate that the use of social media intentionally and critically is effective in supplementing the English language learning process. The study adds to the literature on TELL, and provides implications for English language teachers in university settings.*

**keywords:** social media, English language learning, university students, qualitative research, thematic analysis, digital literacy and communicative competence.

### INTRODUCTION

Today social media has revolutionized the way people communicate, entertain and educate themselves around the world. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter/X are an essential part of the life of a university student, with many students spending hours of their day online each day. Although, social media is basically a platform for social connectivity, it also has important implications for language acquisition and development, especially in relation to language learning of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

The English language remains a key language in all academic, professional and digital communication around the world. L2 development in the multilingual and non-native English speaking environment is not limited to formal L2 contexts, but also includes informal, technology-mediated contexts. Because of the language-learning aspect of social media, students have constant access to language, specifically to English, via written, oral, and visual information from language and culture speakers. (Lai & Zheng, 2018). This exposure offers opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition, syntactic pattern recognition, and intercultural communication, which may be less easily duplicated in the classroom.

Although social media use dominates the lives of university students, the connection between social media engagement and English language development is not adequately examined in academic literature, especially in a qualitative way of focusing on students' voices and their lived experience. Previous research has generally used quantitative methods to assess language development based on standardized tests, failing to capture the complex and subjective nature of language learning processes that are manifested in the students' interaction with the content

of the social media (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012). This study aims to fill that lack with a qualitative study through the use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

The three main research questions that will guide the study are as follows: (1) What are the perceptions of the impact of social media on English language learning among university students? (2) What do students say is most improved in English language competence as a result of the use of social media? (3) What are the difficulties that students face when they use social media as a language learning tool? This research is designed to provide empirically informed findings which could be relevant to language teaching and learning as well as to a general discussion on the educational benefits of the social media platform.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last 20 years or so, there has been much scholarly research on the intersection of social media and language learning. This relationship has been investigated using various theories such as the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, the input hypothesis of Krashen and the interaction hypothesis of Long, among others, which offer complementary perspectives on how digital social interaction could contribute to second language acquisition (SLA).

The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) assumes that cognitive development, such as language learning, takes place in a sociocultural context and through participation in social activities and interaction within a culture mediated environment. A digitally mediated social space, such as social media, can offer opportunities for learners to communicate with both native and non-native English speakers, thus creating conditions similar to those of Vygotsky's 'scaffolded interaction'. Muhammad Al-Shehri (2011) noted that the online social learning environments resemble the collaborative learning paradigm of SCL that place learners in a community of practice where they are provided with opportunities to use language with authenticity and purpose.

Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis suggests that language learning takes place best when the language input is comprehensible, but a little more difficult for the learner than he or she is able to comprehend. The type of graduated and comprehensible input can be found on social media (like YouTube), on Netflix with English subtitles, or on English language podcasts. Sockett (2014) was able to show that French university students' vocabulary and grammatical knowledge were significantly improved following their frequent use of E-LDM, thus applying the input hypothesis to the context of digital learning.

There is abundant research on how social media contributes to vocabulary development. Tseng and Schmitt (2008) reported that repeated exposure to new words in contextually explicit digital materials resulted in deeper retention of the words than being learned in a decontextualized manner presented in a dictionary. Likewise, Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) studied the usage of Facebook for English vocabulary enrichment among university students in Malaysia and revealed that Facebook was a meaningful and engaging environment for learning English vocabulary. Students had several opportunities for exposure to target vocabulary in authentic contexts, as social media was interactive, allowing students to comment on posts, react to videos, and join in group discussions.

Social media has also been shown to have an impact on writing development. Increased students' writing motivation and the number of written productions were observed in social networking sites by Yunus and Salehi (2012). Interpersonal communication that is brief and to-the-point is encouraged by platforms like Twitter, which have character limits; blogging and Facebook posting are found to encourage longer written composition (Blattner & Fiori, 2011). Although not formal, these writing practices help students develop writing fluency and internalization of English grammatical structures.

Increasingly, confidence and pronunciation have proven to be rather complicated language learning areas that have been traditionally associated with the face-to-face interaction. Yet,

listening to spoken English on YouTube, via podcasts or Instagram reels or TikTok clips has been correlated with enhanced oral comprehension and phonological awareness. Klimanova and Dembovskaya (2013) found that exposure to authentic speech in SNS helped L2 learners become aware of natural speech rhythms, connected speech phenomena and prosodic features of English which are not covered in formal instruction.

Informal learning is at the heart of the issue when considering the role of social media in language learning. Benson and Reinders (2011) stated that out-of-class learning of language via digital media is a valid and growing aspect of learning and is more and more becoming a part of language learning formal classes. In informal learning, social media platforms provide continuous access to content in the English language that is relevant to learners' interests and without the mediation of institutions (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012; ULLAH, A., 2020)

Although these advantages, researchers have also noted several issues with using social media for language acquisition. Incorporation of non-standard language varieties, slang and grammatically inconsistent user-generated content can have a negative impact on the acquisition of academic writing competence (Asadullah., Farooqi, M. T. K., & Saleem, K. 2024). Furthermore, the experience of using social media can be distracting and disjointed, which can make it difficult to immerse oneself in the language and to process it sufficiently to acquire it for authentic use (Ullah, A., & Farooqi, M. T. K., 2025).

The aforementioned literature indicates that social media has a significant potential as an additional tool in ELL and needs to be utilized with pedagogical intention and critical awareness. The present study is founded upon the above as it will seek to examine the language learning experiences of university students who actively engage with social media throughout their language learning process.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used for this study is qualitative which has a paradigm of interpretivist approach, which means social phenomenon is understood by the subjective meanings and experiences of the individuals involved (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach is suitable for this study because it is a phenomenon which is subjective, context-bound and cannot be quantified.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students of undergraduate and postgraduate courses with 15 subjects of a Pakistani public university for ascertaining the primary data. The participants were selected using purposive sampling in order to make sure that the interviewees had extensive and frequent experience in using social media in relation to ELL, either as a deliberate or unintentional goal. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the major data collection method as it allows the interviewer to explore themes that arise during the interview while keeping the focus on the research questions (Patton, 2002). Interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, and took place in a comfortable, private environment. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and informed consent was done before the interviews.

The interview guide contained open-ended questions under five thematic clusters: general social media use, platform used for English language engagement, perceived English language improvement, challenges faced, and recommendations for the integration of social media into formal English language teaching. Questions were crafted to encourage rich, detailed stories instead of brief answers and/or categories. Interviews were conducted with the consent of the subjects and later tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data following the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This included: (1) multiple readings of the data with note taking, (2) generation of initial codes from significant phrases and ideas, (3) clustering of codes to identify themes, (4) revisiting themes in relation to the coded data and whole data set, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the final report. We did not use any qualitative

data analysis software to do the analysis because we wanted to have a close connection with the data and provide an interpretive depth. Member Checking, reflexive journaling, and peer de-briefing were used to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis.

An interpretive qualitative research approach that situates empirical findings within the existing scholarly conversation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was followed by a review of relevant academic literature, in order to contextualize and support the interview findings.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The interview data were analyzed to reveal five major themes that shed light on how university students' learning of English is affected by social media in a multi-dimensional manner. Below, each theme will be discussed in relation to supporting participant narratives and to literature relevant to the theme.

#### **Theme 1: Vocabulary enrichment through multimodal exposure.**

The most consistent finding with regard to the benefits of being on social media was the growth of one's vocabulary in English. Of the 15 participants, 12 explicitly stated that they had learnt terms and phrases through regular interaction with English-language content on the platforms of YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, but not in their formal academic learning. One said, "I learn 5 to 6 words daily from the tech and science videos on YouTube in English and use them as much as I can in my writing. This corresponds with the results of Tseng and Schmitt (2008) that repeated exposure to new vocabulary in the context of digital media was more effective in retaining new vocabulary than decontextualized instruction. Multimodal character of social media messages, containing text, sound and image, seems to offer several encoding path opportunities to facilitate deeper vocabulary learning.

#### **Theme 2 Writing Practice and Digital Composition**

The participants stated that social media helped them to engage in English writing practices outside of their academic tasks. Writing captions, comments, tweets and WhatsApp messages in English gave students low-stakes opportunities to practice their written expression skills. Some participants noted that they had learned how to be more succinct and specific in their expression of ideas, not only due to the limits on the number of characters, but also because of the limitations in space. Some participants reported that the ability to write fewer words and phrases on platforms like Twitter had helped them to become more succinct and precise in their ideas. This result is consistent with Blattner and Fiori's (2011) claim that digital writing environments foster various writing skills, such as brevity, clarity and audience consciousness. However, participants also indicated that they were worried about how informal digital writing practices would impact on their academic writing, which was also found in research by Plester et al. (2009).

#### **Theme 3: Improved Speaking Self-assurance and Pronunciation Sensitivity**

Listening to English both in Native and proficient non-native speakers' voice in YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix has improved PWA and speaking confidence, said several participants. One said, "Before, I did not feel comfortable to speak English in class because they spoke it so differently that I did not understand the natural way they speak. But after watching YouTubers every day for months in English, I felt more comfortable. I understood the natural way to speak the language instead of textbook English. It also fits the results of Klimanova and Dembovskaya (2013) who found that using authentic spoken input from social media helps to build learners' prosodic awareness and assists to close the gap between formal and instructed pronunciation and naturalistic English speech. Students with aspirations to international academic or professional careers found exposure to a variety of accents and speech styles to be very helpful.

#### **Theme 4: Informal Learning Communities and Peer Interaction**

Eight participants shared their experiences of being part of English language forums (Facebook group, Reddit forum, WhatsApp study group), which offered them a supportive learning environment to complement classroom learning. Such informal communities were essentially communities of practice in the sense of Vygotsky, where the learning members mutually assisted each other in their progress in language through joint problem solving, joint co-constructive suggestions to use resources and constructive feedback. This is a strong endorsement of Al-Shehri's (2011) view of social media as a sociocultural learning environment. Participants appreciated the spontaneous and informal nature of these peer interactions as opposed to the classroom setting where more formal and evaluative interactions had taken place.

### **Theme 5: Challenges and limitations**

Although participants' overall perceptions of social media in language learning were positive, they also stated some issues they faced when using social media for language learning. Distraction was most commonly mentioned concern. Several participants admitted they had started using social media with the hopes of interacting with English but quickly got lost in other forms of entertainment. Social media platform characteristics that hinder sustained, purposeful engagement in language learning activities were determined to be those characteristics that are deemed addictive, such as infinite scrolling and algorithmic content recommendations. Furthermore, participants said they were not sure about the quality of the language used in the UGC and sometimes they found the language used grammatically incorrect or culturally inappropriate, and sometimes difficult to differentiate from the regular language without the assistance of an instructor.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this research have shown that the social media has a multifaceted influence, which is mostly positive, to English language learning in university students. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews finds that platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp are rich, authentic and motivating spaces to learn vocabulary, to practice writing, to improve pronunciation, and to build communicative confidence. The study also recognizes that these benefits do not necessarily happen unless learners are committed to use social media, are self-regulated, and are critical.

The results have significant implications for English language teaching in the university setting. Teachers should also explore how to integrate discussions of social media as a learning tool into their curriculum as a means to help students engage in productive and critically reflective interaction with English-language online materials. Future studies should investigate the impact of social media use on measurable language proficiency outcomes, as well as the differential impact of various social media platforms and content on various learner populations.

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